

Buddhism Without Frills

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My sincere thanks to all who helped me on this book and those who read my previous book titled “Buddha Impetus to Primitive Psyche” and encouraged me to write another book on Buddhism.



BUDDHISM WITHOUT FRILLS

Preface

Beyond the core concepts of their doctrines, religious books are commonly padded with incidents and beliefs imported from folklore etc., to boost the prestige of the founder and glorify the dogma. The vast collection of Buddhist literature is no exception. Application of common sense can easily detect these “frills” in the Dharma and story of the Buddha. As the title suggests, this book seeks to separate fact from fiction in Buddhist literature and present in a Q&A format, the essence of Buddha’s teaching for reflection upon.

Studies show that regardless of specific religion, we all have a compelling identification with supernatural and religious beliefs. This is attributed to human evolution and social traits. Brain scientists have found that mere hearing alone of the name of a religious leader can trigger stimulation of gratification creating brain sectors in spiritual people. These also affect thinking by promoting the psyche to stay with all its religious teachings while rejecting any incompatible idea whether valid or not.

The first pages of this book do not touch on Buddhism, but explain the development of the human psyche from infant to adult stage to explain our mysterious affinity to beliefs and how it negatively influences rational thinking. I thought it would be helpful to present the fundamental characteristics of the psyche to create an open mind-set first, before we set out to explore the Buddha’s teachings.

The views expressed in this book on Buddha and Dharma are intended to be rational, thought provoking, radical, and cover a wide spectrum of the human psyche, Prince Siddhartha's childhood, the ascetic Siddhartha, the human identity of the Buddha, the Enlightenment, the core Dharma, the non-self concept, the purpose of meditation, the influence of Hinduism on Buddhism, the support the Buddha had, the problems he faced, the false view of supernormal powers and many other matters. To support the views and interpretations presented, citations from the Buddhists suttas have been provided wherever possible.

I trust, readers will ponder with open minds to make their own judgment on the material presented. It could be held that it is inappropriate to critique the Dharma preached by a great person like Buddha. I humbly contend that it is the Buddha himself who introduced a new norm to the world by the Kalama Sutta, which says in summary: "take nobody's mere word for it. Not even my own." Readers may agree or not with my opinions which must be seen as the viewpoints of "an individual" and it is in no way implied that other opinions are all to be rejected.

Knowledge of the story of the Buddha and of the Dharma would be helpful to grasp the views presented. I expect readers will enjoy reading the ideas and novel insight given to Buddhist concepts by an intellectual dissection of Buddhist literature.

BUDDHISM WITHOUT FRILLS



Q: What's your motive in adopting the title “Buddhism without frills?”

A: Any reader will see that Buddhist literature is full of frills. It's important to filter out the frills to extract the real essence of Buddha's teachings.

Q: Is your intention to distinguish fact from fiction?

A: Yes! That's right. Science separates fact from fiction. Similarly, I think by intellectual dissection, it is important to extract the natural realities hidden within or conjoined with the supernatural beliefs that are embedded in Buddhist literature.

Q: What are the frills?

A: When we delve deep into Buddhist teachings with an open mind, the frills can easily be recognized. However, the ability to recognize the frills differ from person to person, as rationality is relative. I know my rationalistic approach in exploring the Buddhist doctrine could be quite different from that of others. Due to this, perhaps my particular rational views expressed in this conversation could hurt the feelings of passionate Buddhists. So, in advance, I sincerely apologize, if my views cause feelings of hurt to anyone. If that is the case, I earnestly request them not to continue with this discussion, unless they still want to understand my views with an open mind.

Q: Why are you making such a statement at the very beginning of this discussion?

A: Because, the human psyche is very sensitive to the core beliefs held by individuals; especially on the religious and supernatural ideas. All beliefs

are imbued in our brains' thinking mechanisms, and hence they are integrated in our psyche. So, any disturbance to one's beliefs, tends to distress one's psyche intensely. Such disturbances, known as cognitive dissonance, can cause recurring stress for a long time. This is an actual fact of life that must be taken very seriously.

Q: Can you please elaborate on what you just said?

A: Yes. How "beliefs" impact our psyche is very complex and hard to comprehend. Beliefs are person specific and a person's affinity to beliefs doesn't depend on her or his intellectual capacity. Our psyche has a strong enslavement to beliefs, and emulates almost identically, the working of an antivirus program in a computer. We install antivirus programs to protect computers from admitting intruding software viruses. Similarly, most of our parents have installed belief programs in our brains in our childhood, assuming that they will help us. Principally, parents do this with the idea of bestowing their love for us; because they know the very same beliefs that came from their parents helped them in their own life.

Generally, infusion of these ideas happens when we are 4 - 5 years old. At that tender age we believe everything that our parents dump into our indiscriminative minds. In our journey from childhood to adulthood, the imbued religionism gets further nourished by the influences of our teachers, the clergy, society and various other sources near and dear to us. Participation in religious events and rituals reinforces our beliefs. Once these ideas get strongly etched into our brain circuitries, they become integral parts of our psyches. A significant characteristic pertaining to beliefs is that, they behave just like the antivirus programs in computers, guarding against disruptive invasions. Once beliefs become well rooted to the core foundation

of our psyche, they are impossible to delete, change or dislodge. Similar to the very high degree of confidence we have in calculating $1 + 2 = 3$, our psyche holds an extremely solid confidence in the beliefs we carry.

Q: What happens when beliefs are challenged?

A: Good question. When beliefs are fed to us at childhood, naively they don't get subjected to critical review. Therefore, as there are no challenges these ideas get deeply rooted in our psyche. Thereafter, whenever our beliefs are challenged by disruptive ideas, the natural reaction is to reject them tenaciously. These reactions that happen consciously or subconsciously continue until all traces of incompatible ideas are completely cleansed. This self-protection process is a paramount requirement to keep our psyche in harmony with its beliefs.

Q: How can you state so bluntly that there is a strong bond between beliefs and the psyche?

A: If you want proof, read the newspapers and other media reports to see ample evidence. Most times the reasons for chaos, wars between countries, incidents of immoral nature and creation of hatred between various societies is due to conflicts amongst belief-based ideas that oppose each other.

Q: Do you think having beliefs is bad?

A: I think, in a way, beliefs should be considered as addictions. Once you become addicted to a given set of beliefs, it continually provides psychological pleasure by stimulating the psyche. This can happen either in one's conscious or sub-conscious mind. Just as habitual drug addicts cannot live without drugs, some people can't live without getting their beliefs stimulated by various means. The stimulating methods or inputs are often provided by the religions or the cults they follow.

Q: In your reasoning, you said that the beliefs established at childhood cannot be deleted from our brain circuitry. That's not true. When I was a kid, I believed in Santa Claus. But I shed that idea when I was about eight years old. How did that happen?

A: That was because you were constantly updating you psyche with true information about Santa, including the fact that you saw Santa at the shopping malls. The extra details you got as updates made you understand the reality. All religious and superstitious beliefs entail many unrealistic, imaginary ideas that are not tangible or proven to be true. The same old program runs in the brain over and over again, with the same ideas and imagery without any updates or evidence to substantiate the dogma and the imagery. If Santa Claus remained solely as a mythical figure, he could have easily existed as a real entity in our minds even today, just like the other iconic fictitious figures that are postulated in religions.

Q: What does science say about human affinity to beliefs?

A: A lot of research is going-on, on this subject. A few years ago, there was a good research article in Time Magazine, which highlighted a “God Gene” innate in us. What the publisher Dr. Dean H Hamer meant by God Gene was; that inclination toward religious faith is no accident; in fact, it is hardwired into our genes. He argued, spiritual belief offers an indisputable evolutionary advantage, providing humans with a sense of purpose and courage that helps to overcome hardship and loss. Spiritual individuals are favored by natural selection, because they are provided with an innate sense of optimism, producing positive effects either at a physical or a psychological level. As a growing body of evidence suggests, belief also increases our chances of reproductive survival by helping to reduce stress, overcome anxiety, prevent disease and extend our lifespan.

Q: OK. Is it good or bad to have beliefs?

A: Having an affinity to religious and supernatural beliefs has a lot of benefits as Dr. Hamer explained. Just like the placebo effect, it is beneficial to a lot of people. I think beliefs were more beneficial to primitive man, than to modern man. The modern brain still has rudiments inherited from the primitive brain that are attuned to adopt beliefs. This could be the primary reason why a wider percentage of people including many scientists are still inclined to spiritual beliefs. As a benefit, beliefs comfort most people's psyche.

However, the brain circuitries responsible for beliefs, act as antivirus programs attacking the incoming incompatible ideas irrespective of whether those ideas are good, bad, true or false. This overpowering characteristic of the psyche obviously doesn't produce rational judgment, as beliefs influence one's decision making often giving prominence to the beliefs rather than basing the decision on intellectual considerations alone. For example, a belief-based motive may make a man kill another without any guilt, quite contrary to rejecting such actions based on common sense driven secular ideas. A good example for this is the so called "honor killing" practiced by extreme ideological fanatics.

Q: What is the overpowering force that prevents from getting rid of one's beliefs? Why can't the beliefs be removed just like uninstalling an antivirus program in a computer?

A: In the case of a computer, the user has full control over installing or uninstalling of the programs. But in the case of a believer, there is no external person to delete the belief programs operating in the believer's brain. Even the parents who have installed them in children's brains, cannot do so. It is an internalized task and the brain itself is the decision maker that has to do

the deleting. But unfortunately, the brains are programmed from childhood to protect all the religious and superstitious beliefs. Therefore, even if a person gets a sudden impulse and directs the brain to remove a particular belief, the brain networks responsible for protecting beliefs instantaneously curb and crush such intentions. Deleting beliefs from a brain is only a remote possibility.

Q: How did the brain circuitries responsible for religious and superstitious beliefs become overwhelmingly powerful to maintain control over protecting of beliefs?

A: I think it is due to two reasons. One reason is the strong influence inherited from our evolutionary progress. And, the second is owing to the nurture in our upbringing.

Q: Can you elaborate on these two reasons?

A: Yes. First of all, we need to understand the evolutionary transformation of the brain from primitive man to modern man. Man evolved on earth about 2 million years ago. Before that we were more like primates with relatively meager thinking abilities. We can still observe this when we visit a zoo and look at the behavior of primates. About 2 million years ago, we had just evolved from primates to a species having the intelligence to make stone tools. However, since acquiring this ability, the archeological evidence proves that this primitive man had not made any improvements to the stone tools for nearly 1.7 million years. After this long technologically stagnant period, there had been a sudden change in man's thinking ability. This change happened very recently, approximated to 100,000 years ago. Some scientists attribute it to the use of fire for cooking, as evidence of use of fire had been found at that point of time. However, thereafter, within a very short

time period of about 20,000 yrs, the primitive brain expanded in size by 1/3 to reach the brain size of the modern man. With this growth, man made tremendous improvements to the primitive tools. At the end of this brain growth around 80,000 yrs ago, man transformed from a social phase of being a “hunter” to a phase known as “hunter-gatherer.” 80,000 years ago is quite recent, compared to a time of 60 million years where the first primates appear on earth. The hunter-gatherers lived longer than the primitive hunters. The longevity gave them extra time to think on things other than hunting. The hunter-gatherers experienced a different type of death than the hunters.

Q: What do you mean by different type of death?

A: The hunter’s death was usually caused by the injuries sustained while hunting or becoming the prey of the carnivorous animals during the hunt. But contrary to this, most hunter-gatherers lived a long life and experienced natural deaths.

Q: What did that do to man?

A: The hunter-gatherer wondered as to what happens to a person after death. Thinking over this question, man planted the very first seed of beliefs associated with death. Most hunter-gatherers lived long to see their extended families. They observed their grandkids having features resembling their ancestors. It made them ponder whether their dead ancestors have been re-born. This observation gradually led to the development of the idea of reincarnation. The ancestors that they saw in dreams and even happened to talk to in the dreams, reinforced the idea of their existence in a world after death. The idea of a world after death had a major impact on their social life. It led to the development of various customs of worshipping the dead; it established burial customs, performance of rituals for the dead and

eventually it led to a practice of seeking help from the spirits. It didn't stop there. The idea of spirits, made man find ways and means of communicating with the spirits. This need, led to a special category of people called Shamans. Shamans were identified as the specialists who could cleverly perform rituals to communicate with the spirits. The demand for contacting the spirits grew with time as more and more people wanted to obtain various favors from the spirits. The Shamans who provided such services became popular and very powerful over time, even to influence the rulers.

Q: Did this lead to the formation of religions?

A: No. Religions came into society at a later time but this was the beginning of man starting to believe in supernatural entities.

Q: You said part of the beliefs came to man through the evolutionary process. Do you consider what you explained just now as part of the evolutionary process?

A: Yes. As you can see the beliefs originated at the tail end of the evolution of modern man, known as *Homo sapiens-sapiens* from the species *Homo-Erectus*. We need to understand all lives come into existence through a process of cell division. There is no birth of new cells. The birth of a cell always arises from the division of a cell. Each of us, is a bundle of billions of cells that all started from a single cell that was jointly formed by our parents. Our parents came into this world via the same process. Hence if we go back along this line into the past, it is obvious that we all have the rudiments from the first ever human cell that existed on the earth. We know that the evolutionary process transmits favorable traits through our genes from one generation to the next. This natural process improves our chances of adapting to the environment for survival and propagation. The traits we

carry in our genes this way, not only carry favorable physical characteristics, but would also carry favorable mental behavioral characteristics that helped life to survive. You may ask me what those are. Instincts and emotional feelings, etc., are some of the obvious mental behavioral characteristics imbued in our brain circuitries. In addition to these traits, I think our genes have facilitated accommodating of supernatural beliefs in our cognitive system. Here, my emphasis is not on a particular “belief trait,” but on the fact that the brain has provision to accommodate affinity to beliefs. This is what Dr. Hamer explains as the “God Gene” in the paper he published. It’s not about God but the affinity that people have to get immersed in or hooked into, in the context of paranormal and superstitious ideas. In simple words Dr. Hamer says “affinity to beliefs is hardwired into our genes.”

Q: You said the second contributor to belief is upbringing. Can you elaborate?

A: Yes. I just explained the inbuilt provision that was evolved in our brains to accommodate beliefs. Now I will explain how beliefs get rooted in the relevant niches or circuitries of the brain’s operating system.

If you observe an infant very closely, you can get a good idea of their inborn capabilities. Just after coming to this world from the mother’s womb they know things like, how to suck mother’s milk, cry to get the attention of others, etc. They do all these things because these are inherited in their basic life operating system that is required to survive and initiate growth. Then gradually they learn skills such as crawling, standing, walking and even understanding the things around them, including identifying the people. They learn all these skills on their own without any coaching. The growth of a child, can be divided into two streams;

1. Development of physical motor skills,
2. Development of mental sector.

Both these streams of development are crucially linked to each other with the brain acting as the control center for both body and mental functions. The physical stream of development is easy for us to understand as it is quite apparent in a growing infant. The mental stream of development involves traits such as anger, kindness, joy, preferences to chosen persons, music, toys, etc. The idea of “self” or “individuality” is a development in the mental stream.

The self-centered life base takes a huge leap after a child learns a language, because language starts the two-way communication process with others. The language we learn becomes another stream of input of information, in addition to inputs received through the sensory channels. The main characteristic of the language-based input can be considered as feeding of “ideas of others.” We can call them as “mental feeds.” Parents are the first to use language to fill the brains of the children with all types of mental feeds. **The Buddha appeared to be the first person in the world to point-out this input as a separate stream beside the five sensory inputs.** Identifying this as a separate input stream is really remarkable, significant and exceptional as this identification helps to understand the crux of how our psyche gets conditioned from the time of birth. This 6th input stream that delivers and depicts others’ ideas, knowledge, reactions, emotions, etc., could come in formats of verbal, non-verbal, written or other communicating media.

Q: Can you explain why this 6th stream of input is so important?

A: The 6th stream of input is clearly defined in Buddhist teachings. Many monks who teach Buddhism mention it as the mind input. But unfortunately, they don't explain it with clarity, probably because they have not figured it out as to what it is. In simple terms, similar to the sensory faculties that receive sight, sound, odor, taste and body sensations, the mental feeds also get fed into the brain in the formats mentioned. Just like the sensory inputs produce pleasure, pain or neutral feelings, the mental feeds that get processed by the brain, produce mental pleasure, mental pain, mentally neutral feelings, emotions, confusions and various ideas or thoughts. That's why the news of the death of a friend makes us sad, or learning Pythagoras' theorem helps us to solve problems. Whilst a language is essential for receiving the 6th stream of inputs, it is the main attribute responsible for conditioning our psyche.

Q: Can you elaborate on the mechanism that conditions our psyche?

A: Yes. Among the many other things, religious and superstitious ideas are given the highest priorities in the things that parents teach children. Scientists are of the view, that by the age of 4 -5 years these ideas get etched in children's brains. As we know, sometimes the religious nourishments come in repetitive doses. As Dr. Hamer explains, most of these ideas get well accepted and ultimately get firmly rooted in their brains as children don't exercise discriminatory thought at that age. Throughout life, some of the pseudo beliefs acquired this way shine as the best answer source for inscrutable questions such as "Where do we come from? Who created the world? What happens to us after death? Who protects us from sickness? Who protects us when we are away from the parents?"

Q: Why do children believe most ideas that their parents tell them?

A: The core characteristic of the human mind is its inquisitiveness and the vast thirst it has to know the answers to all the questions that it comes across. In life when we can't find answers to questions that we desperately need to resolve, our subconscious gets perturbed. As a natural consequence of this inherent characteristic of our childhood we fully believe in the answers of our parents. Research from developmental psychology suggests children can learn certain ideas easily and internalize them deeply. Religious and superstitious ideas that the parents provide comes under this category, and these deeply rooted ideas become part of the brain's operating system.

As you know, by the time, a child is about 12 to 14 months old, most motor skills that are required for life are in place. These motor skills are permanent brain programs, always kept in readiness to be activated to carry out any physical task. These programs cannot be deleted. For example, we cannot unlearn walking even if we wish to. The superstitious and religious beliefs embedded in children's brains are somewhat analogous to the above. Irrespective of the religious dogma, this is the principal reason why beliefs cannot be easily erased from the brain. For example, if you believe that the world was created by a supernatural God or there is life after death, because of an idea planted in your brain in your childhood, then that's it. In fact, such ideas become so natural to you and you might even wonder why the others can't understand these simple facts that are so obvious to you. That's how the notion of "belief" runs in all of us.

Q: Why did you touch on the aspect of belief so much without going into the topic of your title “Buddhism without frills?”

A: Yes, I have not touched on Buddhism or the frills so far, because it’s first very important to highlight what contributes to our psyche’s development and what issues influence us when it comes to the process of understanding things. It is important to be aware of the nature of our conditioned mind, in order to slice and dice the Buddhist teachings to understand its content in a sensible manner.

On numerous occasions the Buddha emphasized the importance of understanding the basis of our affinity to beliefs and the influence it has on how we deal with our day to day affairs. The Buddha pre-warned us about it and advised us to learn his teachings in a rationalistic manner and in the way it ought to be understood. We need to be aware that we have been conditioned from childhood and we evaluate things with this conditioned mind. This is applicable to people of any religion, including the Buddhists. Considering all the reasons that were elaborated so far, when it comes to evaluating belief-based ideas, nobody has a clear environment that could be called “Open minded”. If someone says he or she has an open mind, then in reality it is not true; simply because we analyze all the information through the conditioned mind or the thinking process of which the foundation had been built in our childhood.

Q: In respect of beliefs don’t you have a conditioned mind?

A: I am not an exception. The Buddhist teachings emphasize this conditional aspect extensively. Hence, it’s important to understand the existence of conditioned minds in all of us, before proceeding to explore the concept of the state of Nirvana or the Enlightenment or all other teachings expressed in Buddhist literature.

Q: Other than the external sources that condition the psyche, can a person condition his or her own psyche with his or her own insight directed on beliefs?

A: Yes, a person definitely can. Our psyche always goes through continuous conditioning processes covering all the personal traits we have. But when it comes to beliefs, almost in all situations, any new belief-based ideas that we come across, first get subjected to scrutiny of their compatibility with the existing beliefs. Compatible ones get assimilated into the existing beliefs. Incompatible ones automatically get rejected. So, as you can see, this generic characteristic of the psyche becomes a barrier to rational thinking.

If someone wishes to become a genuine rational thinker, it is important to understand this characteristic nature of the mind first and exert an extra effort to have a mindset that could jump over the spiritual barriers. It's really a gigantic mental task to undertake, simply because it would immediately give rise to a feeling of having an internal war within. But I think it could be done with commitment and dedication with focus aimed to refine the thinking process.

Q: What did the Buddhist teachings tell us about the subject of beliefs and the conditioned minds?

A: The Buddha had an expert understanding of the nature of the human psyche with respect to beliefs and conditioning of minds. The Buddhist disclosure named “*Kalama Sutta*” is an outstandingly unique Sutta that provides the answer to your question. Sutta means sacred scripture. In a broad sense, through *Kalama Sutta* the Buddha tells the world the following:

“Believe nothing, no matter where you read it, or who said it, unless it agrees with your own reasons and your own common sense. Better than a thousand hollow words, is one word that brings peace. Don’t believe in anything simply because you have heard it. Don’t believe in anything simply because it’s spoken and rumored by many. Don’t believe in anything simply because it’s found written in your religious books. Don’t believe in anything merely on the authority of your teachers and elders. Don’t believe in traditions because they have been handed down for many generations. But after observation and analysis, when you find that anything agrees with reason and is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all, then accept it and live up to it. Don’t dwell in the past; don’t dream of the future, concentrate the mind on the present moment. Peace comes from within. Don’t seek it without.”

As disclosed, understanding Buddhism from a rational perspective, could help us to leave out all the frills and extract its essence. An open declaration of this caliber is not to be found in any other religious teaching. Most religions demand submission to the dogma and punishment for the doubters.

Q: That is very interesting. But I don’t think every Buddhist follows this notion?

A: I can’t agree with you more. The reason for it is, from childhood every brain is conditioned differently. The *Kalama Sutta* is advising the followers to simply exercise rational thinking.

Q: Where do you like to start talking about the Buddhist teachings?

A: I think it will be good to understand the life of Prince Siddhartha, so that we can get a rough idea about the conditionality of Prince Siddhartha's psyche, before he became the Buddha.

Q: I know there are lots of stories such as the prince's mother Queen Mahamaya's dreams; the event about infant prince walking his first seven steps on lotus flowers sprang out of the ground and then his pronouncement to the world in a glorious voice that he would one day become a supreme man on the earth. I assume you consider all these found in Buddhist literature as frills?

A: Obviously. I think all babies in the world make the same pronouncement in their usual noisy baby language when they are squeezed out into this world. The difference here seems to be, that baby Siddhartha's scream was translated by someone for the knowledge of others. Excuse me for joking here, but there are so many things like that in the Buddhist literature, that sensible persons will disregard. But there are many others who will take these as actual historical facts.

Even the story of the baby prince emerging from the right side of his mother's body without causing her any pain and then immediately after, the infant prince being passed over to a line of dignitary gods who were present are really kids' stuff. Probably the birth from the right side may have been a method similar to caesarian section delivery adopted at that time. And also, probably the complications the queen had at the flower garden, would have led to her death. But there are a lot of illogical stories out there giving reasons to explain away the Queen's death.

Q: I agree. What can you say about the birth of the prince?

A: Many things. In Buddhist literature, there are a lot of events connecting people and gods. This seems to be very common all along the story of the Buddha. As per Buddhist literature, the “Buddha to be” was a young god in the previous life. This young god was reminded and requested by the senior gods that it was time for him to be conceived in Queen Mahamaya’s womb for the betterment of mankind.

In another story, one of the elderly seers of the prince’s father King Suddhodana, named Asitha had been holidaying in a particular heaven at the time of the prince’s birth. While he was wandering around, he saw some gods making merry. On inquiry, he was told they were celebrating the birth of the prince Siddhartha. So, Asitha rushed to the palace, to see the baby. When the King brought the prince to be shown, the baby prince’s toe touched the seer’s turban. Based on this incident, Asitha prophesied that the prince Siddhartha will one day become a highly revered holy man.

Leaving the prophesy aspect of this story aside, it seems that some people at that time had capabilities of spending their holidays in heaven with the gods. If this particular heaven was located in an adjacent city, then I can understand the reality of this story. However, many ardent Buddhists believe these narrations as real historic facts. Regardless of this story these types of miraculous stories are commonly found in all other religious literature also and hence should not be taken seriously. The purpose of these fictitious stories is merely to spice up the psyches of followers, rather than to state the real facts.

Q: Yes, there are so many of those miraculous stories before and after the prince became the Buddha. Do you have any special stories worth mentioning?

A: Yes - several! One interesting story that comes to my mind is how the prince Siddhartha made his wife, pregnant. The prince got married at the age of 16 to princess Yasodhara. Then at the age of 27 he made her pregnant by placing his thumb on the princess's navel and making a wish for her to get pregnant. This story brings in the miraculous element of a virgin birth. These claims are absurd, though there are people who believe these events. Also, the Buddhist text says the reason for making her pregnant was not because the prince Siddhartha wanted a child, but to make their parents happy with a grandchild. However, another motive behind this false explanation seems to be a wish to indicate that the prince was not interested in sex because of his spiritual standing or perhaps to give an impression to the Buddhist followers that having sex is an immoral act that is not proper for spiritual people.

I also like to comment on prince Siddhartha's famous sightings of a sick, an old, a dead and a holy person that made him realize the impermanent nature of life and prompted him to embark on his journey to find a solution to suffering. It is not logical to assume that an educated and mature person like prince Siddhartha didn't know the nature of life until he was 28. Considering the philosophical minded nature of the prince as we understand, his decision of renunciation would have been due to his concerted effort in seeking an answer to the depressing nature of life that he experienced. The fact that his father attempted to shield him from seeing the unpleasant phases of life by keeping him in exceeding luxury, possibly would have had an impact on his decision of renunciation.

Q: What do we know about prince Siddhartha Gautama's upbringing?

A: I believe, he would have been an extremely religious person in his childhood. The principal reason for him to become a religious minded child can be attributed to two reasons. One could be his innate nature, and the other could be the influence of the prophecies that were made after he was born. In the case of the latter, in addition to Asitha's prediction that the prince would one day become a religious leader, a seer named Kondanna who was the youngest and wisest of the eight seers that King Suddhodana consulted, also predicted that prince Siddhartha would definitely become an Enlightened one or the Buddha one day.

We have to assume here; the word Buddha meant a person who achieved Moksha as defined in Hinduism, as most people in India including the prince's family were following a strand of Hindu faith of the time. There was no word called Buddha, at that time. The definition of the word Moksha is given in the Hindu text called "*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*" and states that it is the status of liberation from the cycle of birth and death.

In regard to the prophecies made about the prince; they cannot be considered secrets as all the people in the entire kingdom would have known about them. Hence, definitely we need to assume that the prince would have got to know all these prophecies as he was growing up. It is extremely unlikely that the secrecy that his father wanted to enforce to prevent the prince getting to know about these, prevailed as he expected. Once the prince got to know the prophecies about him, consciously or subconsciously they would have influenced him to set his life goals to fulfill them one day.

Q: What about his schooling?

A: From age seven, the prince was taught by a teacher called Visvamithra on the “*Guru–Gola*” basis, which is referred to as the “Teacher - Student” education system, that prevailed at the time. In brief, in this education system, the student is virtually handed over to the teacher and the teacher takes the full responsibility for upbringing and educating the child. The education and training include spiritual disciplines, good governance, athletic skills and all those essential things a royal and noble prince needs to govern and defend a kingdom.

The prince surely would have had the best education in his time. But in that time education didn’t include reading or writing, because they didn’t have books or a method of writing. The religion that the royal family followed was a strand of Hinduism. Among other things, being a religious child, I believe the prince would have learnt Hinduism extremely thoroughly. There aren’t many details about the prince’s childhood activities. But the texts mention several conflicts that prince Siddhartha had with his cousin, prince Devadatta. Most records indicate, that prince Siddhartha was a very kind hearted and logical minded child.

It is obvious that this was the time that he learnt all about Hinduism, covering the core Hindu concepts such of “Samsara” - the endless cycle of birth and death; “Karma” - laws of cause and effect; “Maya” - creative energy; “Dharma” - moral duties; “Ahimsa” - nonviolence; “Atman”- soul; “Moksha”- liberation from the cycle of birth & death; and also, about Hindu cosmology including various types of heavens, hells, gods, brahmas, etc. The spiritual practice in Hinduism at its highest level, directs the followers to do their own inner search with the aim of achieving the ultimate goal of

self-realization. Hinduism is also associated with multiple spiritual systems comprised of thousands of brahmas, gods and goddesses. In Hinduism, Brahman is the highest universal principle, the ultimate reality that gives a concept of an “One absolute being” but not in an anthropomorphic form, like in Abrahamic religions. Also, Brahman is considered the ultimate energy source or the flux everything is interlinked to. All the gods and goddesses come under the umbrella of Brahman.

Q: Most Hindus are vegetarians. Is that anything to do with showing kindness to animals?

A: There is an element of kindness attached to it. But one of the reasons behind it is due to their belief in reincarnation. The Hindu people believe that they may accidentally eat the flesh of a reincarnated relative or a friend born as an animal, as humans could be reborn as animals.

Q: What is the history of Hinduism?

A: It is a good question. It is better to know about Hinduism before we go into Buddhism. India has one of the longest recorded civilizations in the world with a rich history of mythology. The Dravidian People who were spread throughout India between 3000 B.C and 2500 B.C, seem to be the oldest known habitants. Historical ruins dating back to 2500 BC provide evidence of an advanced civilization in the Indus Valley, where the principal cities were Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro. The deities and people who lived in these two regions were believed to be Mesopotamian in origin. Being farmers, the gods worshipped by them were connected with fertility. The archeological findings of some seals in Harappa, give some clues about their religion. A figure bearing a yoga posture with crossed legs, a plant with a leaf, a bull, an elephant and a tiger are among some of the figures found on

those seals. The yogi figure that was found on a seal was a remarkable find, as similar pictures have not been found in other parts of the world.

Q: Did people follow Hinduism at that time?

A: No. The Hindu religion didn't exist at that time. Being primarily agricultural people, the gods worshipped by them were connected with fertility. Towards 1700 B.C., a new wave of conquest destroyed the Indus Valley civilization, and these invaders brought their own religion. They were the Aryans. They were a light skinned warrior race of relatively low culture, compared to the culture that existed in India. They were masters in the use of horses, chariots and swords, which brought them victory over the Dravidians. The Aryan invasion tremendously influenced the original religions that existed in India, making new deities and a mixed belief system. Reincarnation and Karma were pre-Aryan concepts that existed in India. The Aryans managed to get things done through their gods by performing rituals. They appeared to have had special skills in doing this. Man's ability to manipulate gods led to the idea that men were superior to gods. This historical idea in mixed form, still exists in various parts of India and in the eastern religions. This was a novel idea that was never found in the West. The origin of the "Vedas" which are a collection of hymns, that spell out the Hindu precepts came into being around 800 BC forming the original strand of Hinduism. Later in history these various stands were unified by modern Hinduism.

One of the main social factors defined in the Vedas was the caste system that still prevails, in India. This system categorized all people into four castes. The principal castes are the Brahmin (priests), Kshatriya (nobles), Vaishya (craftsman & merchants) and Shudra (workers). The only unification of the

people of all castes was the common liberty to believe in the religious system defined by the Veda. Prince Siddhartha was born to the Kshatriya caste.

Q: What else do you see in Hinduism that has a connection to prince Siddhartha?

A: Present day Hinduism has seen a lot of refinements to the stands of Hinduism that existed in the Buddha's time. However, the Vedic based hard-core Hinduism teaches of four stages or roles that one should go through in life. These are:

1. Student,
2. Householder,
3. Retiree,
4. Ascetic.

Particularly, most people who belong to the Brahmin caste strictly adhered to this practice even today.

These rules are stipulated in Veda. Accordingly, those who belong to the Brahmin caste adopt the ascetic stage when they reach middle age. If a son is born to a family, it is customary to take it as a sign of the end of the father's responsibility to the family. The father assumes that the son would take over the household responsibility as he grows up. In Hindu scripture, this is compared to a new shoot sprouting from a stem of a cut down tree and its gradual transformation to a fully-grown tree. The purpose of the Hindu ascetic stage is the rejection of domestic life and realization of life in a higher perspective. This is accomplished by resorting to ascetic practices. This was the norm, practiced by the people of the Brahmin caste at the time of the Buddha. In the last years of their ascetic life, they are expected to serve society by giving back the things that they learnt, in a role of a teacher or an

advisor. All ascetics were not people of old age. We know from the Buddhist texts that there were young ascetics too. Ascetic Kondanna who served the King Siddhodana as an advisor was a very young and intelligent ascetic.

Q: Are you trying to say Prince Siddhartha's mind was influenced by the Vedic teachings for his renunciation of domestic life?

A: To me, it seems so. That's why we should explore the young prince Siddhartha's "mind conditioning" during this discussion. Though prince Siddhartha was born into the Kshatriya - 'Nobles' caste, which is different to the Brahmin caste, I strongly think that his reason for renouncing domestic life on the night Prince Rahula was born, was directly influenced by his upbringing as a person devoted to the Vedic faith. Probably it could have been a different story, if the baby born were a girl.

Q: What do you want to say about the renunciation?

A: There are a lot of mythical stories including a story as to how the gods influenced the prince to renounce his domestic life and helped him to become an ascetic. According to the texts, the gods even provided the robes at the point the prince abandoned his royal attire to become an ascetic. Being an intelligent person, obviously the prince Siddhartha would have had commonsense to prepare for his journey well in advance, without anticipating someone from the heavens to present him the robes to change into.

Q: Yes. That is something strange to believe. What happened after he put on the robes and became an ascetic?

A: The ascetic Siddhartha went to the two best reputed spiritual practitioners first Alara Kalama and later to Uddaka Ramaputra, to learn whatever he

could from them. Being an intelligent person, this would probably have been in his plan in advance. The two of them taught different philosophical facets that they practiced expertly. However, after mastering their philosophies and practices, the ascetic Siddhartha found that it did not fulfill the enormous expectation that he had. So, he decided finally to go on his own, and explore the inner life aspects that he was seeking an understanding of. At this time, his father, King Suddhodana sent five ascetics to support his now ascetic son. During this self-exploration and research period with the support of the five ascetics, the ascetic prince subjected himself to extreme levels of austere practices. At one instant the people around him thought he was dead. In that instance, this news was made known to his father by a messenger. The king had so much confidence in his son, he said to the informant that his son would not die without first becoming a Buddha. Here again, there are frills associated with this story. The texts, state that the informant was a junior god rather than a man. One needs to understand that King Suddhodana would have been well aware of everything about his ascetic son, although the prince lived many miles away. After all, Siddhartha was a crown prince with a wife and a child. Though there were no high-speed electronic communication systems at that time, definitely the King would have had a messenger service to get regular information about his son.

Q: Why are you explaining all this in so much detail?

A: It is because, the moment the word Buddha is heard, the brains of many Buddhists switch over to a different realm, barring them from thinking of the real situations under which these historic events took place. Some people believe gods from the heavens were having a constant watch on what was happening in Buddha's life. It is necessary to understand the entire story of the Buddha in a realistic manner to have a good grasp of his teachings. This could be done easily, simply by applying common sense in a broad realistic

way when we read the content in the Buddhist texts. A rational person could easily filter the supernormal elements that I call the frills, to extract the real story of the Buddha.

Q: What happens next in the story of the Buddha?

A: After having gone through the austerities the ascetic Siddhartha realizes that it doesn't help him to discover what he is looking for. With that realization, he abandons severe austerities and adopt a moderate regimen, which came to be known as the "middle path."

Q: Why did the ascetic Siddhartha resort to meditation? Wasn't there any other method to do the inner search?

A: The practice of meditation comes from the Hindu religion. The Hindu teaching explains the meditative steps required to explore the inner self under various yogic practices. So, I believe, not only was the prince Siddhartha conditioned by Hindu ideas to practice meditation, but it was the conventional wisdom that it was supposed to drive a person towards achieving Moksha. If we think carefully about looking into the inner workings of our mind, selecting a quiet place and analyzing our thought process silently seems to be the prudent way to go about in understanding the elements and working of the inner self. In respect to your second question as to whether there are other methods for inner search, we can explore that later with what the Buddha taught on this aspect.

Q: What happened after the ascetic Siddhartha gave up the austere practice that he followed?

A: First of all, the five ascetics who were keeping him company decided that there was no point in being with him anymore. So, they left immediately.

Even the wisest person among the five ascetics, Kondanna, who predicted that one day the prince would become a Buddha, didn't remain with the prince but joined the others. The five ascetics moved to a town named Issipathana which was about 140 miles away from the city of Bodh Gaya which was historically known as Uruvela in the state of Bihar in India where ascetic Siddhartha continued his journey on the inner search.

Q: That wasn't good, I believe. But, why did they take that stand?

A: We have to understand the inner thinking of those five ascetics to find the answer to your question. The five ascetics were conditioned, too. They were from the Brahmin caste. Hence, they were strong followers of the strand of Hindu faith that existed at that time. When the ascetic Kondanna predicted that the baby prince will not be a king but would definitely be a supreme being, what he meant was, one day the prince would attain the supreme status of "Moksha" as believed in the Hindu religion. The word Buddha didn't exist at that time. Moksha is defined as the liberation from the cycle of life and death and at the end the soul dispersing to the presence of supreme divinity, which is also defined as the source of the original quantum of energy that caused all things in the universe to come into being. The Hindu spiritual practice directs one to adhere to inner search and to achieve the ultimate state of self-realization. One of the common practices followed by many ascetics to achieve this goal was to make the body undergo austere conditions to experience painful feelings. So, these austere methods were what the five ascetics thought would help the prince to reach Moksha. But because the ascetic prince abandoned the austere practices, the five ascetics totally lost faith in him and didn't want to support him anymore.

Q: Did the middle path of practice bring forth the desired result ascetic Siddhartha wanted?

A: Yes. He kept onto his method for nearly twelve more months. Towards the latter part of this period, as the story goes, one day a daughter of a village headman offered a meal to ascetic Siddhartha. After having this delicious meal, he took his empty food bowl to the nearby river and laid it upon the water of the river. Before letting off the bowl, he made a predictive wish. If he were to attain Buddha-hood, the bowl would float upstream and if instead it went down stream he would not. Strangely, according to text, the bowl floated upstream hit a rock and sank.

Q: What are you hinting to say here? A frill?

A: Two things. The first is, it shows the ascetic prince had a superstitious mind at that time. We can ignore this as he was not Enlightened then. The second fact is the encounter with the village headman's daughter. It shows that the place where the ascetic prince lived was close to a village, rather than the forest that many people visualize in the story of the Buddha.

Q: Did he attain Enlightenment in keeping with the prediction of his wish?

A: The ascetic prince attained Enlightenment on that night. It was a full moon day. The Buddha explained that the realization he made was solely through his direct knowledge gained through meticulous thinking.

Q: What are the immediate events that took place after that and who recorded all the historical events that we read of?

A: It is an interesting question. According to the texts, immediately following up with his Enlightenment, the Buddha spent seven weeks in the

vicinity of the Peepal tree or the ‘Bodhi Tree’ as some call it, under which he attained Buddha-hood or Enlightenment. After that he ventured out to announce his discovery. There are very many frills associated with the events that took place during the 7-weeks after the Enlightenment. Nobody recorded these events. These events were disclosed by the Buddha himself in a discourse named *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*, which means discourse of the “Noble Research.” But it is important to understand this discourse was made many years after he became the Buddha. “*Sutta*” is the Pali language word for “sermon” or “discourse”.

The timing of this *Sutta* should be noted correctly as many Buddhists wrongly assume this *Sutta* as the first discourse of the Buddha, because the content provides the front end of the story leading to his very first sermon which is well known as *Dhammacakkappavattana–Sutta*. *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* which states what happened during the seven weeks immediately after Enlightenment, was disclosed to a very famous aristocratic female disciple of the Buddha named Visakha, several years after establishing the community of monks.

Q: Can you explain what led the Buddha to make his first sermon the *Dhammacakkappavattana–Sutta*?

A: It’s important to understand how happy the Buddha would have been, moments after realizing what he achieved. He achieved what he was looking for, after a long spell of research. Definitely the Buddha would have been very anxious to divulge to the world, what he found Enlightenment to be. As you can understand, like any scientist wanting to present his discovery to the world, the Buddha would have been working on the preparatory works of his presentation to broadcast his discovery to the world.

Q: OK. What do you mean by preparatory works?

A: As stated earlier, *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* was disclosed a long time after the Buddha attained Enlightenment. Though it was disclosed a long time after, it spells out what the Buddha was doing and thinking about, immediately after he attained Enlightenment. It gives details about the seven weeks he spent in the vicinity of the Bodhi tree under which he achieved Enlightenment. According to this Sutta, during this time he thinks about teaching his discovery to the others. **First, the Buddha thinks that the truth he discovered is lofty, subtle, deep, complex and too difficult for others to grasp it. Based on this thought, initially he was hesitant to reveal what he discovered.** However, while the Buddha was contemplating further over this issue, a nearby lotus pond came into his sight. He compared the people in the world to what was going on in the lotus pond. In the pond, he saw some lotus buds still under water; there were others which had risen just up to the water level; and there were still others that stood above the water as full lotuses. Those flowers were completely resisted by the water. In the same way, he thought, in this world there are people at different levels of intellectual capacity. Some people would be able to understand what he discovered to the fullest extent, some would understand it after making a concerted effort and some wouldn't. This logical analysis helped the Buddha to decide to go ahead with the teaching. The frill version of why the Buddha decided to teach was connected to a Brahma named Sahampathi who could read the mind of the Buddha and requested him to teach the Dharma. Brahmas are said to be at the highest level of supernormal entities and are in a higher realm than gods and deities in the many layered universe.

Q: Didn't the Buddha have powers to predict that he was destined to go ahead with his teaching and his teaching mission was going to be a success?

A: Buddhists generally believe that the Buddha had enormous powers such as ability to read others' minds, foresee the future, ability to levitate, moving back and forth between the earth and heavens and many other similar supernormal feats. If the Buddha had such psychic powers, it wouldn't have been necessary for him to hesitate or go through the above logical analysis to take a decision as to whether he would go ahead with the teachings. We know, he had thousands of disciples in his lifetime and millions of followers all around the world later. But he probably didn't foresee any of those or he didn't have any of the supernormal powers that people think he had. His decision to teach his findings was purely based on logical analysis. Throughout his teachings that went on for 45 yrs, the Buddha emphasized the importance of logical thinking & reasoning and often advised his followers not to be inclined to superstitious beliefs.

Q: When and to whom did the Buddha deliver his first sermon?

A: According to *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* which gives the Buddha's version of events that happened after the Enlightenment, the Buddha was looking for intelligent people like Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputhra, the two teachers who helped him at the beginning of his ascetic journey, to deliver his first sermon. But Alara Kalama had passed away a week before and Uddaka Ramaputhra, a day before. Then he decided to disclose his findings to the five ascetics who had abandoned him. They were in the city of Issipathana. So, the Buddha headed on a long walk to Issipathana which was about 140 miles eastward from where he was. This journey took around a week after he spent seven weeks at the Bodhi tree. If the Buddha had powers to levitate, it would have been very impressive of him to do this tour over

the air to show off to the five ascetics, some of the supernormal powers that he gained through achieving Enlightenment. But I don't think the Buddha had such powers, though most Buddhists think of levitation as a fundamental ability of the Buddhas and Arahants. Arahants are the Enlightened disciples who have got to that status by following and fully comprehending the Dharma discovered by the Buddha. A geographical map that shows all the places the Buddha visited in India, indicates that all of them are within walking distance.

On his way to Issipathana, he met a person named Upaka. Upaka asked the Buddha who his teacher was. The Buddha replied that he himself understood everything and he was his own teacher. Upaka ignored the Buddha and went his own way. I think *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* which is the Buddha's own version of the historical events, specifically wanted to mention this incident to highlight to his audience that he had no teacher other than himself. This story also tells us that the Buddha didn't have an unusual aura as people believe he had. If there had been, Upaka would have treated him differently.

When the five ascetics saw the Buddha at a distance, coming to see them, they decided not to attend to the formal hospitalities they usually observed. However, as the Buddha approached them, they couldn't resist the feelings of respect that his presence caused to arise in them and they attended to all the formal hospitalities. Later, when the Buddha mentioned his discovery to the five ascetics, they didn't give their due attention to his claims. Then, the Buddha challenged them by inquiring of them, whether he had ever claimed anything like that in the past. That made the five ascetics realize that the Buddha had something important to disclose and they agreed to give their

attention to listen to him. If he had an aura after Enlightenment or reached the place by air, things would have been very different.

Q: What did the Buddha disclose?

A: Before answering that question, we should try to understand or guess the mindset that the Buddha would have had, after he decided to disclose his discovery. As we know, when a scientist makes a discovery, the immediate follow up step would be the presentation of the findings to a set of intellectual people who are able to understand the particular field of research. These presentations are loaded with anxiety for any scientist as they understand the important implications of these events. The contents and quality of the presentation material matters a lot to them, as it vitally affects the recognition or rejection of their findings achieved through a lot of hard work. Under those circumstances, the Buddha too, would have been anxious, as the moment arrived for him to divulge what he discovered or achieved as “Nirvana”, “Awakening”, “Buddhahood”, “Enlightenment”, etc., as defined by various names in scripture. I believe the Buddha had sufficient time during the seven weeks he spent at the Bodhi tree to think through and prepare his presentation. Unlike nowadays, there were no facilities at that time to write down any of the presentation material. Hence, the Buddha would have had to sort out, structure and memorize all the material to be presented. All reviewing, editing, etc., would have been done mentally.

The Buddha’s presentation comprised of two Suttas, namely:

Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta and *Annattalakkhana Sutta*. We need to understand the significance of the above two Suttas becoming the first and the second out of thousands of Buddhist Suttas that were preached in his life time. Because of the fact that the Buddha himself prioritized these two Suttas, we undoubtedly need to assume the content disclosed had the real

essence or the cream of what the Buddha discovered. Very correctly, the Buddha selected the most appropriate intelligent audience for his presentation as they were familiar with what he had been doing for nearly seven years.

The very first sermon presented is known as *Dhammacakkappavattana-Sutta*. It means “Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Truth.” This was about the Four Noble Truths, which are considered as core foundation of Buddhist teachings. The Pali word “sathya” translated as truth, has a deeper meaning to reflect “reality” rather than truth. In very brief terms the four noble realities are:

1. Unhappiness exists,
2. There is a cause for unhappiness,
3. Unhappiness can be ceased, and
4. There is a path to the cessation of unhappiness.

This discourse resembles a doctor’s diagnosis of the illness of unhappiness and the remedy for curing it. I would like to point out, “karma” and “reincarnation” were already known concepts to the people at that time and were not mentioned in these two Suttas.

Q: Do you have any idea as to why unhappiness became the principal subject in the first discourse?

A: Yes. If you think back why the prince Siddhartha relinquished his luxury life, it gives you the answer. As far as I can grasp it, his mission of research was to understand the source of the impermanent nature of life, the suffering it creates and to explore whether there is a solution to it.

Q: Did the Buddha’s presentation go straight into disclosing the four Noble Truths?

A: No. The Buddha disclosed the Noble Truths after justifying why he gave up the austere practice that led the five ascetics to leave him, about a year earlier. He knew he had to sort that out first to create a proper stage for his presentation. He explained the purpose of following a middle path without resorting to either of the two extremes of indulging in sensual pleasure or devoting life to austere practices in his pursuit of spiritual exploration. He said the middle path put him in a mindset to achieve vision, gain knowledge, calmness, penetration to insight that was unknown to him before. He said that led him to the realization of Enlightenment. Then only, he disclosed *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*.

Q: Can you explain the relevance of the four Noble Truths?

A: Yes. First of all, the Buddha declared “Existence of unhappiness” as a truth or a ‘reality’ as some scholars define it. This may sound quite obvious to you as both happiness and unhappiness exist in life. But, here the purpose of stating this specifically, was to establish the existence of unhappiness as a fact of nature, and understand its existence in its full implications.

Q: What is unhappiness?

A: Anything that gives rise to unhappiness in life, is what it is. The Sutta says that birth is suffering; aging is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering; sorrow and lamentation, pain, grief and despair are suffering; association with the unpleasant is suffering; dissociation from the pleasant is suffering; not getting what one wants is suffering.

The second Noble Truth distinctly identifies and emphasizes the reality that there is a “reason for unhappiness.” The Buddha said the wellspring of

suffering is craving and attachment. The third Noble Truth explicitly states that “unhappiness can be eliminated” by development of wisdom. Basically, wisdom helps to deconstruct the knee-jerk reaction of craving and attachment that leads to unhappiness. The fourth truth is the most important one. It gives the prescription which is the “path” that should be followed to achieve the cessation of unhappiness.

Q: What is the ultimate remedial path that should be followed to achieve the cessation of unhappiness?

A: The treatment of unhappiness is achieved by following the path named as the “Noble Eightfold Path.” It comprises the following eight elements:

1. Right View,
2. Right Intention,
3. Right Speech,
4. Right Action,
5. Right Livelihood,
6. Right Effort,
7. Right Mindfulness,
8. Right Concentration.

Buddha subcategorized these eight elements into three sectors. Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood and Right Effort were subcategorized as **ethical conduct**. Right view and Right intention were subcategorized as **wisdom development**. Right mindfulness and Right concentration were subcategorized as **mental development**. The word “Right” can be replaced by “Wise” if it helps to better understand this.

Q: I see that birth is denoted as suffering in the list of sufferings. Did the Buddha say that stopping the birth and death cycle is what is Enlightenment, as defined as Moksha in Hinduism?

A: No. Achieving enlightenment was not emulating the definition given by Moksha, though the Buddha did state that it was his last birth. In the Buddhist context, Enlightenment can be considered as the realization of impermanence, conditionality, suffering and the non-self nature of life and all entities, that releases one from the state of suffering. We can evaluate what the Buddha said about this being his last birth with his core Buddhist concept disclosed in Buddha's second Sutta named *Annattalakkhana* Sutta, which was also revealed to the five ascetics just after the first Sutta.

Q: Before going into the second Sutta, is that all you find in the first discourse?

A: Basically, that's all what is given in the first Sutta. But it is necessary to think broadly as to how the Buddhist teachings got into text, as it is the text that remains now for our reference and represents the Buddhist teachings.

Q: Can you briefly set out how the discourses were written down?

A: Yes. After the Buddha attained Enlightenment, he preached for nearly forty-five years. Over thousands of Buddha's sermons and other content disclosed were not recorded in written form at that time. They were passed on from monk to monk according to the verbal passing-on system practiced at that time. By the time the teachings were written, five hundred years had passed after his death. It is evident that the leading Buddhist monks had taken extra care to structure and scrutinize the teachings to ensure the integrity of the record of Buddha's words. However, it is important to understand the possibilities of contamination or corruption creeping into Buddhist literature during this 500 yr period. That is why, even in the very

first Sutta, we can find narrations such as the gods took the opportunity of listening to the Sutta and the earth shook at the end of its delivery, etc. These seems like obvious frills and gross exaggerations to glorify the event in the minds of lay followers.

Q: Do you know where and when the Buddhist teachings were first committed to text?

A: This happened in Sri Lanka, the island south of India, during the reign of king Valagamba of Sri Lanka in 29 – 17 BCE. The language used was ‘Pali’. It’s not a spoken language. The history of how the Buddhist teachings were passed over to this period, is that previously there had been three organized conferences in India, conducted by the leading Buddhist monks, at different periods to review, refine and preserve the orally transmitted teachings. The structured teachings that were first preserved in Pali text was known as “Tipitaka” or the “Pali canon.” Tripitaka comprised three baskets as the name implies. The three baskets or the categories are: “Vinaya Pitaka” (rules of conduct), “Sutta Pitaka” (collection of discourses) and “Abhidhamma Pitaka” (Analytical teachings that spell out the fractional elements of the mind and thought categories). The Pali canon is a vast body of Buddhist literature. In addition to the Tripitaka there are a few other additional Buddhist texts that are considered as the ‘first set’ of Buddhist collections. Considering the vast collection of Suttas, we need to treat each Sutta as the summarized form of a sermon. Based on this assumption, *Dhammacakkappavattana-Sutta* should be considered a summarized version of the first sermon of the Buddha.

Q: So, do you think there could have been more details in the *Dhammacakkappavattana-Sutta*?

A: Invariably the five ascetics and the Buddha would have had an extensive discussion on the contents disclosed in this Sutta. But, all those interesting discussion details, including the questions and answers they may have exchanged, cannot be expected in a summary. If the Sutta had all that, it would have been marvelous for us to get a good picture of the whole session as this was the very first segment of Buddha's presentation.

Q: How did the five ascetics respond to this Sutta, and did anybody attain Enlightenment at the end?

A: Let's understand the mindset of the five ascetics, first. All five ascetics were from the Brahmin caste. They would have been ardent followers of the strands of Hindu doctrine that existed at that time. That said, their spiritual beliefs had invariably included the popular concepts of karma, rebirth, existence of thousands of gods, and various superstitious ideas that were fundamental to the Hindu religion. From day one, after they were assigned to help the ascetic prince, what they expected from the ascetic Siddhartha was to achieve Moksha as defined in Hindu religion. The word Buddha didn't exist at that time. The content of the first sermon didn't strike any chord in their line of beliefs. As stated earlier, I definitely believe the original discourse would have had much more details than the summary we read now. Invariably, a long discussion between the Buddha and the five ascetics would have taken place, on the topics of the four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path. However, according to the Sutta, only Kondanna the youngest and wisest of the five ascetics, comprehended the content at the end of this disclosure. According to scripture, the Buddha was very happy and made an inspired utterance, "Kondanna has indeed understood! Kondanna has indeed understood!"

Q: Did the other four get at least impressed by the disclosure?

A: Nothing of that sort has been mentioned about them on listening to the first Sutta. But, surprisingly all five ascetics attained Enlightenment, after listening to the Buddha's second sermon that followed the first. That is called *Annattalakkhana-Sutta*. The *Annattalakkhana-Sutta* discloses the core characteristic of the Buddhist doctrine, the concept of 'Non-self' which is known as "*anatta*" in Pali language. In here, the Buddha begins by emphasizing the fact that if there were a self it should be autonomous, but no such thing can be found in reality. The Buddha expressed the concept of self or soul or "*atman*" defined in Hindu religion, as a delusion. The non-self concept is unique to Buddhist teachings in opposition to many religions that incorporate the concept of self.

Q: Do you have any idea why this second sermon made all of them to attain the state of Enlightenment and become entitled to be called Arahants?

A: Yes. Before that, I like to say the Buddha's discovery of the non-self concept is in some sense akin to Einstein's discovery of the theory of relativity. Because, both these findings are marvelous realities that were brought to light from nowhere by these two great persons, purely by thinking outside the box using common human cognition. These great concepts that were not seen by others were cleverly brought to light by the Buddha and Einstein for the knowledge of others. When Michelangelo was once asked about the statue of David, he said "the stature was there in the rock. I just removed the extra pieces out to make it visible."

Q: It seems that you are overly ebullient about the non-self concept. But, how did the five ascetics who believed in a soul or atman with their religious background react in accepting this concept?

A: As emphasized throughout our Q & A session, religious beliefs are very near and dear to each individual. We need to understand that this rule was applicable to the five ascetics too. However, the *Annattalakkhana-Sutta* did the trick for the Buddha by persuading the five renowned ascetics to shed their religious beliefs and embrace a completely new concept that was in sharp conflict with a core fundamental Hindu concept. For the five ascetics to understand the non-self concept in the way it ought to have been understood, there would have been strong exchanges between the five ascetics and the Buddha. Specially because non-self was a counter revolutionary idea to Hinduism, the discussion they had would have been extensive and thought provoking. However, at the end, it seems the five ascetics were so convinced of the combined contents of the two Suttas, that they immediately decided to become the first disciples of the Buddha. On understanding Buddha's teachings in totality, all five Enlightened Arahants immediately undertook missions to spread the teachings of the Buddha or the "Dharma" as it is commonly known now. In addition to what they learnt from the two Suttas, according to *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*, the Buddha took turns to teach them in smaller groups to prepare them for the Dharma mission.

Q: What is the concept of non-self?

A: Basically, it is the fact that there is no-soul, atman or anything as 'self,' in reality. The mental stream of activities happening within us creates the illusion of self. Now we know that these mental activities take place in the brain; but this was not known in Buddha's time. Mental activities happening in the brain were commonly thought of as happening in the mind. But the

mind is not of the nature of an object or entity and it is not a noun. It's a verb as it is the functioning of a cluster of mental processes. Hence the self that gets created as a result of mental processes is an illusion. The well-known Indian philosopher J. Krishnamurti says "Thought creates the thinker; it is the thinking process that brings the thinker into being. Thought comes first, and later the thinker; it is not the other way around. Thought is the thinker."

In the Buddhist context, the concept of "I", the individuality, the thinker or whatever we compose as self, actually is an illusionary impression created by the functioning of mental net-workings of the brain. Though the Buddha would not have known about the function of the brain at that time, he was extremely ingenious in perfectly understanding the mental processes that were happening within us. It seems to be very hard to name any other person like the Buddha who had understood our mental processes to such a degree of clarity and detail, in human history. The Buddha acquired the realization of non-self, by digging into the inner workings of thinking by meticulously inquiring into it.

Q: What made you to say, that the Buddha didn't know about the functioning of the brain?

A: The function of the brain became known to man only as recently as 300 yrs ago. Before that people had no idea about its function. In the period 600 BC to 250 BC, the human heart was considered as the "implied control center" of the body. In Buddhist scriptures, there are many references to almost all parts of the human body; but nothing has been mentioned about the brain. Aristotle (384 – 322 BC) believed that the heart, was the location of intelligence and thinking. At that time people thought the function of the brain was to cool the circulating blood in the body. When the Egyptians

mummified bodies, they preserved the heart and most other internal organs for the next life, but they scooped out the brain through the nostrils and discarded it, showing their ignorance of the importance of the brain. It would have been much better if the Buddha had known about the brain.

Q: That is interesting. If there is no self or soul or atman, there is nothing that is associated with continuing a journey from one birth to another. Is that correct? I am skeptical of what you are saying. All eastern religions including most Buddhists believe in a soul and cycles of birth and death, connecting it with the concept of Karma that influences most events in life. Most eastern religions compare Karma to the shadow that follows you.

A: All the ideas that you express, have come from the Hindu strand of religious beliefs that existed at the time of Buddha. Actually, in the very original Vedic texts, one's afterlife was only in heaven or hell, based on meritorious or demeritorious acts the person had performed. But return to earth was a later addition to address the issue of what happens to the soul when all merit and demerit run out either in heaven or hell. What the Buddha discovered was, the very opposite of these concepts. I will explain, how to understand the concept of non-self properly and how this concept is related to the four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path and Enlightenment. Also, I can conceptualize why the rebirth concept got into Buddhist teachings.

Q: Can you please explain?

A: Understanding the non-self concept in a real experiential sense is not easy. Understanding the “non-self” concept in a literal and un-internalized sense doesn't support the journey towards Enlightenment. But, deeper understanding and application of the “non-self” concept with the integration of the Noble Eightfold Path into mental operation, makes one experience the

center-less reality of life. It is an experiential or empirical realization that makes someone attain the status of Enlightenment and not any philosophical understanding.

The Buddha was concerned about whether people could ever understand the non-self concept intimately. It is why probably the Buddha was initially hesitant to teach as this was his core finding, but it was hard to comprehend. When Einstein presented his findings, some scholars laughed at it. But he was lucky that one professor understood that there is sense in what he presented and he took the effort to understand it clearly. That helped the whole world. In a way the Buddha was fortunate that the five ascetics understood the non-self concept. What would have happened if the five ascetics rejected this concept?

Several years after the Buddha established his community of monks, his chief assistant Ananda once commented to the Buddha that it is very easy to understand the concept of non-self. The Buddha knew that Ananda's comment was a casual one, as he knew Ananda was not capable of grasping the *anatta* concept easily in a realistic and experiential way. At that instant, the Buddha pointed out to Ananda that it is not easy to understand in the way Ananda thought he understood, implying the complex nature of the non-self concept.

Q: Explain how it should be understood?

A: Understanding the four Noble Truths and practicing of the Noble Eightfold Path with the integration of understanding the reality of the non-self concept are mandatory requirements to achieve Enlightenment. Let's examine how the Buddha explained the concept of non-self to lay people.

To avoid the confusion over the self and non-self concepts, the Buddha explained that there are two categories of truths, namely the “Conventional truth” and “Ultimate truth.” In day-to-day life, most things we perceive can be considered as conventional truth. Given below are a few examples. We perceive the earth as flat. That is the conventional truth, but it is really not flat; a sphere. Many people will not be able to visualize it but it is the reality. We know that an atom is over 99% hollow, because the electrons circling around the nucleus are at vast distances compared to the size of the nucleus of the atom. We are made of atoms. Hence, we must be over 99% hollow. But we do not define our body that way, though it is the reality. White light is made of seven colors, but we do not see the colors separately and we assume the light is colorless. These examples show us the differences between the conventional truths and the ultimate truths. Depending on situations we use both these streams for the purpose of understanding, explaining things and communicating properly. If people try to be absolutely specific in using ‘ultimate truth’ in dealing with daily matters, we will run into great trouble.

The Buddha said the self exists conventionally, but in the realm of ultimate truth there is no such entity. In Buddhist teachings “*anatta*” or non-self has to be understood in the context of ultimate truth.

Q: Was this the full content, disclosed in the *Annattalakkhana-Sutta*?

A: To explain the non-self concept the Buddha, delved into the five elements that the people conventionally considered as self. These five elements primarily belong to two categories; the body (Rupa) and the mind (Nama). The mind is subdivided into four elements. These four elements are feeling, perception, opinions and consciousness. The body (Rupa) is also re-defined as form. These five elements; the body, feeling, perception, opinions and

consciousness are known as the five Khandhas (aggregates or constituents) in Pali language. Many people perceive the conglomeration of these five aggregates as self. The Buddha explained that none of the five aggregates taken individually or taken in any combination or all of the aggregates combined together, can be constituted as self.

Q: If there is no-self then there cannot be a thinker of thoughts. If the non-self concept is right, then who carries the Karma? Who is reborn?

A: In all world religions other than in Buddhist teachings, there is an entity called the self, which carries the ownership of one's soul from one life to another. According to many major religious teachings, the soul gets subject to punishment or reward by God on the day of judgement. On the day of judgement many souls will be consigned by God to end up in the kingdom of God, which is called heaven, the rest will end up in hell. In Hinduism the soul goes through a journey of life cycles with rewards and punishments based on the merits or demerits known as Karma that are acquired by the individuals by doing good or bad deeds. However, according to Hinduism, with one's concerted effort the soul can achieve "Moksha" which is defined as the freedom from the cycle of birth and death. When a person who achieved Moksha dies, his soul joins the ultimate flux of energy which is also in a way how Hinduism gives an idea of a supreme God. This flux of energy is defined as what everything including the universe was supposed to have originated from. In the great books of Hinduism, the subject of self is defined by connecting it to two facets called the "Nama" (Soul or Atman) and "Rupa" (body) that we discussed before. The Buddhist teaching is very much allied to Hindu teaching in many respects and hence it is important to understand the marked differences between the two ideologies in respect of understanding the soul. In Hinduism the self is explained around the

following slogans: “You identify your body, but you are not your body, your soul is the witness of your body; you identify your thoughts, but you are not your thoughts, your soul is the witness of your thoughts; you identify your emotions, you are not the emotions, your soul is the witness of your emotions”. As phrased above, the self or the soul is correlated as a witness in the “Nama” and “Rupa” concept. The Buddha was aware of this explanation, and hence he clearly explained his idea on this view by stating that there is no-witness either to be defined as self. In other words, there is no thinker of thoughts or a feeler of sensations or a receiver of reactions, within the context of ultimate truth. Some people who cannot understand the non-self concept but biased on the idea of existence of a self, try to explain their view by saying that there is no-unchanging self. They attempt to support the idea that there is self but it is subjected to impermanence. This is not correct as “*anatta*” concept solely refers to non-self or the delusional idea of a self.

To understand the non-self concept further, consider what happens when we are fully anesthetized? If there is a soul or self associated with us then what happens to it when we are anesthetized. We go through the same condition when we are in deep sleep too. Anything called self clearly doesn’t exist under these conditions as the mind is out of operation. The mind or the mental activities are what create the sensational delusion of self. As soon as we wake up from these two situations, the five sensory signals as inputs flood into the brain and the brain engages in processing these signals. The engagement of the brain and activities happening due to processing of input signals create the pseudo self. Dream situations are completely different to deep sleep situations and fully anesthetized situations. When someone is in a dream state, though the external sensory signals are shutoff, the past data in the memory provides the sensory inputs to the thinking circuitries to

create the dreams. In dream situations, the thinking processes that are actively creating the dreams, creates the feeling of pseudo self or “I” that take part in the dream. If we go a little bit deep into our thought generating process, we could see that at every moment there is a birth of a thought followed by its death. And it happens continuously. Every instant is a momentary activity resulting in birth of a thought. We mistakenly grasp the environment that is created by the mental feelings happening in the brain as self. The soul or the self is an illusion and a non-reality created by the brain activities.

Q: Then who carries the Karma?

A: Understanding the reality of the existence of the illusionary feeling of self is the crux of the Buddhist doctrine. The Buddha vehemently rejected the “soul” theory in Hinduism, which was a popular concept commonly accepted by the people at the time. It seemed to me, understanding the concept of non-self by the five ascetics was the key reason, why they relinquished the Hindu strand of beliefs and decided to accept the Buddha’s teachings. As we discussed at the beginning, we need to understand that it would have been a gigantic mental task for all of them to leave aside the beliefs they held all their lives to accept something new as the non-self concept. Buddhist scripture states – *“The foolish man conceives the idea of self; the wise man sees there is no ground on which to build the idea of self. Acceptance of the truth of the illusionary nature of self will free a man from suffering, if he only makes the effort”*.

OK, coming back to your questions of who carries Karma; because of the inclusion of the word “who” in your question, your question of “who carries Karma” becomes invalid. In Buddhist philosophy there is no-self, as self is

an illusion. Because of the word “who” in your question, the question become meaningless and hence an answer cannot be constructed. A sutta called *Avijjapaccaya Sutta* explains the invalidity of the question with the word ‘who’ in it, even for the application of the principle outlined in *Paticca-Samuppada* that I would like to discuss later.

Q: Don’t you believe the concept of Karma?

A: I thought you will ask that question. Say a child born has learning difficulties. A Christian parent explains this as the will of God. A Buddhist parent will explain it as due to Karma. Both these are consolatory beliefs that cannot be proved or disproved. The Buddha did not preach a consolatory Dharma and he advocated us to be open minded. I will give some ideas from the Buddhist teachings point of view to express my opinion on this old Hindu concept. The meaning of Karma is action. The actions can be in thought, word or deed. The result of Karma is known as *Karma-Vipaka*. Karma or the action can be casual. But in Buddhist teachings it is ‘intentional’ actions that matters when it comes to Karma. When we do something intentionally that can get registered in our brain as memory and that memory can result in *Karma-Vipaka*, the way the following example demonstrates: Say you are selling fruits. Someone wants a dozen apples. You intentionally put into the bag only 10 apples but take money for a dozen apples. If you have been brought up as an honest person, this fraudulent intentional action will come to your mind from time to time and will give rise to a guilty feeling in you. So, you suffer with the guilty feeling. A Karma like killing your parents was categorized by the Buddha as something that will definitely bring unpleasant results in the same life period. A grave action like that will obviously haunt that person repetitively and put that person in constant agony unless he is a mental retard. Similarly, a good deed you have intentionally done will always give you a pleasant feeling, when you think of it. So, the principle of

Karma connected with your mind makes sense to me in your lifetime but when you win a lottery, connecting it to a deed that you have done in the past, seems absurd and doesn't hold any logical sense. When you fracture your arm, relating it to a bad deed you have done aeons ago is equally lunatic.

Q: Why is it that the non-self concept was not discussed widely in the Buddhist communities during the time of the Buddha?

A: There are several reasons. Non-self may be a terrifying idea for many but the main reason why the Buddha himself did not publicize it extensively, was simply because many people couldn't grasp it well, as it is a complex concept. The dialogue between Ananda and the Buddha we discussed before, is a good example. Furthermore, the non-self concept contradicts the belief in re-birth or reincarnation that was popular in the community of people at that time.

Q: Why did Buddha promote the re-birth concept far more than the non-self concept, which was a unique discovery?

A: The simple answer is, the Buddha used the re-birth concept as a “marketing” tool to spread his core doctrine of how to cease suffering. Though it was not central to his teachings, the Buddha adopted the rebirth concept with a good intention of simply guiding the common people to look into their life in a different way as spelled out in his teachings. The concept of rebirth was tactically adapted by the Buddha, mitigating the possible confusion and confrontation that would have been created if the non-self concept was given prominence in his teachings.

Q: Why was it necessary to adopt rebirth concept?

A: Its puzzling isn't it? I like to draw your attention back to the logic where the Buddha thought through the process of teaching his Dharma when he **initially hesitated** and wondered whether to teach it or not. He compared the people to the lotus flowers in the pond that were in various stages of development. The Buddha knew there were people of various intellectual capacities in the world. So, it was necessary for the Buddha in order to teach his Dharma, to mend his teachings to suit various people's intellectual capacities. Almost all the people in India at his time believed in reincarnation and Karma concepts. From day one, if the Buddha resorted to preach only about the four Noble Truths, Noble Eightfold path and the non-self concept, there wouldn't be any Buddhism or Buddhist philosophy left today. Even in the modern time we live in, the natural tendency of our psyche is to believe in some form of an existence after death and also, in this life time to seek favors from supernatural powers like God or gods. Most people are born worshippers. This is due to our evolutionary traits inherited and the social behavioral influence of the communities we live in.

The Buddha understood these human factors, absolutely well. Just because he had wide insight into human nature, the Buddha didn't want to keep hammering the non-self concept into all the people, instead he cleverly mended his teachings to suit various audiences. In order to get some of his teachings to penetrate deep into peoples' minds, the Buddha narrated stories like "*Jathaka* tales" and embedded his vital teaching points in these stories. Some of these stories teach about acquiring merit by doing wholesome things. The Buddha, in his teachings expanded the commonly believed Karma concept to a novel level by defining a wide range of Karma categories. The Buddha probably did this enhancement as the belief in Karma had a deep influence on humans. Even westerners seem to have some

natural inclination to this concept. The Buddha also included the concept of heavens & hells in his teachings as the people had believed in heavens and hells for a long time in our short human history. All these were ideal traits to influence the introduction of secular fruitful principles into the lives of people.

Q: So, do you think the Buddhist teachings have several add-on streams deviating from the core concepts, because the Buddha had to mend his Dharma to cater to a wider spectrum of people with various intellectual capacities?

A: Obviously yes. The five ascetics were intelligent to understand the essence of Buddhist ideology that was taught to them. However, if the Buddha restricted all his teachings only to the core concepts that were disclosed to the five ascetics, probably there wouldn't be any Buddhism left today. His teachings combined certain Hindu concepts that were not detrimental but were helpful to convey his message which was the path to the cessation of suffering. He knew the core concepts were meant for a few who could progress into the experiential realization of Enlightenment when they delved deep into the task of inner search. Mixing some of the Hindu concepts into his disclosures was very beneficial to many people who sought spiritual harmony along the lines of the beliefs they already had.

Q: Do you think the Buddha at least intended the intellectual people to understand that there is no re-birth?

A: I definitely think so. For an example, the Sri Lankan Buddhist scholar monk Dr. Walpole Rahula after a lengthy conversation with Philosopher J. Krishnamurti opined that there cannot be re-birth according to Buddhist

teachings of anatta concept. This is stated in the book titled “Can Humanity Change?” with the subtitle “J. Krishnamurti in Dialogue with Buddhists.”

Just to give you a nice quote along these lines by Albert Einstein, *“It is a good thing that this individual life has an end with all its conflicts and problems. Those who brought about the belief that the individual continues to live after death must have been very sorry people indeed.”*

Leaving this quote aside, first of all, we need to consider the word “who” in the question when we talk about re-birth. So, as we expanded this topic in the discussion earlier, I wish to reiterate that the question has no meaning with the word ‘who’ in it. In other words, it is important to understand the non-self concept in order to analyze “what or what is not that constitutes the idea of self.”

Q: Why did these two contradicting concepts, rebirth and non-self in the teachings, cause turmoil among the intellectuals during the time of the Buddha?

A: In Buddhist texts, we can find many instances where the Buddha was very cautious about this issue coming up and leading to controversy. There are a few instances, of the Buddha and some of his disciples discussing it.

Q: Can you give some details of those discussions?

A: According to scripture there were 10 questions that the Buddha refrained from answering. The Buddha said he will not answer those ten questions simply because those would not be beneficial to anybody in the context of cessation of suffering. Will the Buddha be re-born? was one of those ten questions. However, this question was repeatedly raised by many of his disciples who had discussed it among themselves during Buddha’s time.

Anuruddha, a cousin of the Buddha was regarded as an intelligent monk who was renowned for answering questions emulating the style the Buddha used to answer questions. When some intellectual nomad asked Anuruddha the question whether the Buddha will be reborn after his death, Anuruddha said “the Buddha exists after death; does not exist after death; both does & does not exist after death; neither exists nor does not exist after death.” However, after observing the confused response of the nomad, Anuruddha had a doubt about the factuality of his answer. As it was bothering him, Anuruddha decided that he should correct himself. So, he reluctantly decided to get a clarification about his answer from the Buddha. The Buddha based his answer, by questioning Anuruddha about the five aggregates (Khandhas) as many people at that time associated self with the five aggregates. The Buddha’s answer to Anuruddha was aimed at pointing-out “what the Buddha was not, rather than who the Buddha was.”

The answer in summary Buddha questioned Anuruddha as to whether he can define the Buddha as the combination of all five aggregates viz. the form, feeling, perception, fabrication and consciousness; or any combination of those aggregates or by any of those individual aggregates? When Anuruddha answered that none of those three options, was the Buddha, the Buddha said, “then how could Anuruddha give an answer about afterlife when there is nobody as the Buddha exist in reality.” In other words, the Buddha implied that the question is merely wrong in the context of “Ultimate Truth” as there is nothing called self or even someone called the Buddha in reality. This was one of the 10 questions the Buddha decided to refrain from answering. Therefore, we need to evaluate why the Buddha answered this question at this instant. It is logical to assume here, because of Anuruddha’s original

answer that could have confused many people, the Buddha was compelled to correct Anuruddha's answer without leaving it for further speculation.

Questions: Are there any other instances given in the scripture on raising this very issue?

A: The answer to this particular question appears in several places in the scripture. But the answer had been provided by several renowned monks using the same structure of the answer that the Buddha narrated to Anuruddha. Basically, the answer is structured in negating the association of the five aggregate to what people commonly believed as a self, with the emphasis drawn to the non-self concept the Buddha disclosed in the *Annatalakkana Sutta*.

In *Yamaka Sutta*, the Buddha's chief disciple arahant Sariputta, narrated the same answer when this question was raised by a disciple named Yamaka. There are also indirect references to this question in *Bhara Sutta* and *Khajjaniya Sutta* in Samyutta Nikaya. Also, it is extraordinary that once Sariputta asked this question of what happens to the Buddha after his death, from arahant Mahakassapa who was considered a monk of incredible intelligence by the Buddha himself. Mahakassapa's answer to Sariputta was, that the Buddha didn't express this specifically. When Sariputta asked why not, Mahakassapa said "Because it is of no benefit and does not lead to turning away from worldliness, nor from dispassion, cessations, inner peace, direct knowledge, Enlightenment and Nibbana."

Q: It seems that even the great monks like Sariputta and Mahakassapa who were Enlightened arahants, have had questions on the issue of afterlife?

A: Yes. So, that means though they were arahants they too had unsolved questions and issues related to afterlife. The Buddhists believe that arahants can foresee the future, but it seems based on these incidents that it is not so. However, let us consider further on the answer the Buddha presented to Anuruddha. Basically, I don't see any illogic in applying the same structured answer to any living sentient being as this answer is deeply based on the concept of non-self. It can be applied to you, me or anybody. So, it shows the absurdity in talking about afterlife when nobody as an identity exist in reality, as the Buddha demonstrated to Anuruddha.

Q: Don't the scriptures mention 28 previous Buddhas and a future Buddha, supporting the concept of rebirth or afterlife?

A: Yes. Let's go into some details and evaluate the veracity of those claims. *Mahapadana Sutta* discloses the existence of the 28 previous Buddhas eons ago. In fact, it is not thousands of years ago but millions of years ago. Among many other details, according to this Sutta it lists out the social caste of each Buddha in the list according to the Hindu caste system we discussed earlier. Several of these former Buddhas have been born in the Brahmin (priests) caste and some in the Kshatriya (nobles) caste. Also, this Sutta compares Gautama Buddha to Vipassi Buddha and attests that both these Buddhas were born into the Kshatriya caste. It also states, that at the time of Vipassi Buddha the human life span was 80,000 years. Vipassi Buddha had been born millions or trillions of years ago. If these facts are correct their births wouldn't have taken place on planet earth as we know according to latest archeological findings the earliest human civilization found was dated back

to about 8000 yrs. About 20,000 yrs. ago we just became hunter-gatherers from the primitive hunters. So, technically the planet earth is not a possible birth place for Vipassi Buddha. However, there is another sutta named *Ghatikara Sutta* which narrates a story about the Buddha once laughing when he saw people worshipping a shine in the City of Kosala without knowing its significance. The Buddha explained to Ananda that it was a stupa constructed for Vipassi Buddha, connecting the story to a potter named Ghatikara. The fact of, Vipassi Buddha being the 22nd Buddha, this story adds more confusion and absurdity to the chronological information on the past Buddhas considering our short history of civilization.

Now assume the births of previous Buddhas had taken place in other life bearing planets in the cosmos. If that happened to be true, then it raises the necessity of having to pre-establish the Hindu caste system prior to birth of each of these Buddhas as *Mahapadana Sutta* clearly indicates the castes of all the previous Buddhas. So, the details of the previous Buddha's evoke more skepticism on the validity of the content given in the scripture. To explain this further, the Vedic religion has to come into existence first, as it is the Vedic religion which forms the caste system. In India the caste system came into being after the invasion of the Aryans from the Middle East, as it is they who segregated the general public into various castes, depending on the specific work that they were doing. Hence, more than going into the validity of these facts on previous Buddhas which is baseless, we need to ponder why this disclosure was made by the Buddha. My personal view is that these types of tales helped many people at that time, to strengthen their faith-based beliefs. Interestingly during the time of Padumuttara Buddha, the Buddha was born as a lion whilst Anuruddha was a monk under this Buddha. And during Dammadassi Buddha, the Buddha was the God Indra, the head of the gods.

While I am definitely dragging these tales into the frill category, the Buddha wouldn't have disclosed the *Mahapadana Sutta* if the archaeological history of the world was known to him or to the people at that time. People need to understand, we wouldn't be here today if the meteorite that destroyed the dinosaurs had not fallen on earth, as it is what led to the propagation, evolution and dominance of the mammals which eventually led to evolution of human beings.

Q: Didn't a professor named Dr. Ian Stevenson of Canada do a lot of research work and publish a paper on the subject of reincarnation?

A: Yes, he did a few decades ago. His name is always cited when it comes to research on reincarnation. He has conducted research over thousands of cases who were supposed to have had memories of their previous births. He didn't commit himself to one position after all his research. He argued only his case studies couldn't, in his view, be explained by environment or heredity, and that "reincarnation is the best fit explanation, even though not the only one, for stronger cases that were investigated."

Q: What do you have to say about it?

A: Considering the world population and the number of people who die every minute, the number of cases coming up with claims that they can remember previous lives are only a handful to justify making any judgement on this. That's my opinion. If it's true there should be a huge number of cases surfacing especially in an era when we communicate with the whole world with social media and internet. Most of these cases that have surfaced are from the cultures where reincarnation is part of the belief system, and hence there is a human element associated with it when it comes to the data extraction for research work. People who don't talk in favor of Dr. Ian

Stevenson's findings, say his mother was into Theosophy that included eastern religions. When Ian was a child, he was very sick and used to read all his mother's books to spend the time. The influence of the books and thinking over his sick nature, has made him interested in reincarnation according to him. Some critiques are not ruling out imaginative storytelling on the part of the children claiming to be reincarnations of dead individuals. Those who have children will understand the capabilities kids have in fabricating interesting stories of other characters when they are of 3 to 5 yrs old. These stories can possibly lead to findings of dead people elsewhere, matching the characters and incidents and then lead them to further expansion of the stories. However, it is good to have an open mind on this type of research to find the true nature of the claims. It is good to say we still don't know, if we don't have conclusive scientific evidence on rebirth.

Quite apart from the subject of reincarnation, researches have found many people who received donor organs, developing liking to various foods, music and even adopted new behavioral patterns that they never had before, after receiving the donor organs. Investigations have revealed that those were the common traits of the donors, inferring possibility of some type of memory transfers from donor to receiver through the organs. This shows how much we yet do not know about living cells and memories that biological cells could carry and possibly infuse into others.

Q: We have deviated our focus from the discussion we had on the content of the first two Suttas. Can we go back?

A: Yes. We should.

Q: You said, understanding the four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path that is required to achieve Enlightenment, are directly linked to the concept of non-self. Can you explain?

A: The Buddha's seven years of research was focused on cessation of suffering. I believe the Enlightenment the Buddha achieved was the solution to the mental based suffering. Common sense shows us, the Enlightenment has nothing to do with the physical suffering. Obviously, the physical suffering like aging, decay, getting sick, death, etc., are inevitable natural phenomena that every life form is subject to. Even the Buddha couldn't halt the physical stream of suffering after attaining Enlightenment. Same is true for all his disciples including the arahants who achieved Enlightenment. If we review all suffering that we could think of, it is quite apparent that a major part of all our sufferings belongs to the mental stream. In this context, I feel the word unhappiness gives a better meaning than the word suffering. As they say, "Simply there is no stress in the world, only the people think stressful thoughts." According to the Buddhist teachings, practicing the Noble Eightfold Path leads you to achieve cessation of the mental stream of suffering or unhappiness or the "dukkha" as defined in the Pali language. All of us have experienced occasions where our thoughts have been tons heavier than the head! Happiness and unhappiness in final analysis are what we create on our own. Nobody can transfer them to us.

Q: How can one follow this prescribed path?

A: First of all, without trying to practice it blindly, let's analyze the Noble Eightfold Path to understand how it could help to bring about the cessation of the mental stream of suffering.

Q: Why did you say “without practicing it blindly?”

A: I meant practice simply because someone asked you to, without you yourself reasoning out. OK, take the element Right Speech for example. Think about it. You will find that, one of the biggest reasons for having unhappy situations and lingering stressful setbacks in life is directly associated with wrong communication or not practicing a simple task like Right Speech. Even thinking about it moderately, it shows us that exercising Right Speech, leads to happy outcomes rather than creating unhappy or stressful situations.

Q: Is practicing Right Speech easy?

A: It’s not easy.

Q: Why is it difficult?

A: One of the setbacks in practicing Right Speech is the ego centric nature of our mindset. The second difficulty is our reactive outflow of words that happens in habitual mode rather than in a thoughtful mode. The famous quote of “Engage your brain before the mouth is put into action” illustrates the importance of structuring our word flows in a thoughtful manner.

Q: What is required to practice Right Speech?

A: Two things are required. One is to enhance the quality of our speech. The other is to ensure doing it intentionally and in a thoughtful manner. Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration, are the two things that we need to ensure that quality and intent are both inherent to implement and meet the norms of Right Speech.

Q: Aren't these two elements, also included under the Noble Eightfold Path?

A: Yes. All the elements of the Noble Eightfold Path are interlinked and all are integral parts of the path to Enlightenment.

Q: Explain why Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration are required to exercise Right Speech?

A: To answer this question properly, we need to understand how we learn to “think” from day one. I don't think an infant can think from day one; maybe they can at a very elementary level. Thinking is something we learn and develop as we grow. You may also refer a book I have written titled “Thinking Explored” and also a YouTube video titled THINKING: (<https://youtu.be/Id9NZGLGAxU>), on how we learn to think.

As we discussed earlier there are six streams of inputs flowing into our brain. These inputs (*uppada* in Pali), get subjected to processing (*thiti* in Pali) and result in producing thoughts and emotional feelings as outputs. During this distinct sequential process, i.e. inputs --> processing --> output, past information stored in the brain gets drawn into the processing “thiti” stage, for every thought and emotional feelings that we produce. These are the fundamental bases on how the brain circuitries for thinking have been developed from our day one and how all our thinking takes place. The degree to which accessing and addressing the quantum of past memories for processing inputs depends on many factors such as the specific situation, the personality of the thinker, the nature of the third party involved, etc. i.e. In some instances, we look into more of our past memories and in some instances less.

Dr. Daniel Kahneman, a Nobel Prize winner, in his research into the mechanism of thinking, categorized the thought generation process into two systems. He calls them the System 1 and System 2. For easy understanding the System 1 is summarized as “Thinking-fast” and the System 2 as “Thinking-slow.” Thinking fast, is what commonly happens in our life situations and it happens almost in an automatic mode. The sum of addition of $2 + 2$; answering the question “what is your name?”, looking in the direction of a sudden flash of light, understanding the facial expression of another person, are some examples of thinking fast. Also, things like recognizing your mom, actions like walking, talking, etc., that we do without intentional concentration on the task, fall under “Thinking-fast” category. “Thinking-slow” is when we make a deliberate attempt in the thinking process. Examples such as, working the solution of 57×93 ; trying to guess where the closest town to the south of New York City; writing answers to a question paper, etc., are for the “Thinking-slow” system. Thinking-slow happens in ambiguous situations which present a dilemma. In the “Thinking slow” process we analyze things with deliberate intent to arrive at the final thoughts.

Q: What is the connection the above explanation has to do with my question on Right Speech?

A: The connection is, Right Speech has to happen under the “Thinking-slow” mode in a thoughtful manner, contrary to “Thinking-fast” mode which is habitual and not reliable as it is more like reflex action.

Q: Do you think, Dr. Daniel Kahneman’s concepts help one to understand Buddhist teachings?

A: Yes, very much! That’s why I brought it up. We should always try to use the latest scientific knowledge we have on the brain and thinking, to

understand the Buddhist teachings better as Buddhism goes well with science.

Q: Did the Buddha give a parallel to the explanation and analysis you mentioned of Dr. Daniel's?

A: The Buddha explained this phenomenon in a different way. Instead of explaining about these two systems, the Buddha gave methods to refine our thinking and process all our thinking through the Thinking-slow system. The Buddha gave guidance to cultivate not only Right Speech but all the elements in the Noble Eightfold Path, in this way.

Q: Can you bring more clarity to your answer?

A: What we have to understand is that we are more accustomed to use the lazy, easy or habitual ways in attending to our day to day affairs, as characterized in the Thinking-fast system. The 'Thinking-slow' system which is thoughtful, is the stream that the Buddha advocated us to develop and practice. You must have seen these characteristics in certain prominent people that has enhanced their leadership qualities. The Dalai Lama and Nelson Mandela are fine examples to demonstrate this quality. When a question is asked, these exceptional persons, process their thoughts in an intentional manner. They think of producing their thoughts in a way to ensure that what they are saying is ethical, constructive, intelligent and beneficial to the world. They may have got these qualities naturally by birth or perhaps by training & development. You may have come across many people having these qualities.

Q: Yes, I have. What is the difficulty in switching over to the Thinking-slow system?

A: The difficulty is our mind conditioning from childhood that we discussed at the beginning. We have been nurtured to use the Thinking-fast or the lazy habitual system, most of the time. The solution the Buddha suggested to overcome this habitual practice, was to develop “mindfulness.”

Q: Explain how mindfulness became the solution?

A: Take the development of Right Speech for example. There are two aspects to it that I mentioned earlier. One is the quality aspect. And the other is the usage aspect. In regard to the quality aspect, it is something that the practitioner needs to concentrate on developing and improving over time. However, even after developing Right Speech to a top-quality standard, if that person doesn’t use it, it is of no use. This can happen if the person still resorts to the habitual “Thinking fast” system. This is where mindfulness gets into the picture. Mindfulness is the process that helps to capture the inputs and intentionally prompt the Thinking-slow system to take control, process the inputs and deliver “Right Speech.”

Q: What is the Buddhist method of developing mindfulness?

A: The answer is meditation.

Q: How does meditation help this task?

A: It is important to understand the purpose of meditation before practicing it for the mere sake of practicing. If someone practices meditation without knowing the purpose of it, of course that person can still become an expert on meditation. But such expert knowledge will be futile, if it is not used for the purposes the Buddha intended. I believe most people practice meditation because the Buddha attained Enlightenment through meditation. But that

seems like trying to re-discover the steps required for Enlightenment. The Buddha discovered the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold path and the concept of non-self, through meditation. So, the Buddha has already done all the hard work in discovering those. Hence, the importance here is to understand why the Buddha pronounced meditation as an integral part of cultivating the elements of the Noble Eightfold path to achieve Enlightenment.

Q: OK, then can you explain the purpose of meditation?

A: Sure! The two core mindfulness meditation methods taught by the Buddha are known as “Samatha” (serenity) and “Vipassana” (insight) meditations. The sole purpose of meditation is to improve our thinking system. Our thinking system comprises three stages, namely the input stage, inputs processing stage and the final output stage which represent thoughts and emotions. This process takes place in our brain all the time with the six streams of inputs we receive. I argue, the purpose of Samatha meditation is to develop the inputs capturing mechanism. What I mean is, practicing Samatha gets our attention to capture what is received by the six streams of inputs and consciously prevent the inputs going through the Thinking-fast system. Once the inputs are prevented from going through the Thinking-fast system, they get diverted to the Thinking-slow system for processing. Secondly, I argue that the aim of Vipassana meditation is to develop our mental skills to ensure the input processing is done consciously with complete awareness and control of the thoughts and emotions generation process. In other words, the purpose of Vipassana meditation is the enhancement of the “Thinking-slow” system. We need to understand it is the thoughts that make us happy or unhappy. When you are dead, the pain is felt by the others, not by you, because you don’t generate any more thoughts.

Q: Can you explain both streams of meditation in detail and bring clarity to what you just said?

A: If you analyze the typical Samatha meditation, its guidance is to concentrate on the breathing or on a specific sensation to see whether the control of concentration can be sustained on it. But it is a difficult task as your mind wanders around responding to other inputs and sensations that come externally or internally. However, if we keep practicing Samatha meditation, then it can gradually improve control over sustaining of concentration. The training in Samatha meditation therefore, is the key to mental alertness and discriminative capturing of the inputs and diverting the inputs to go through the Thinking-slow system instead of the habitual Thinking-fast system. Also, Samantha brings-forth serenity. A person with serenity will treat his or her inputs in a controlled fashion. Basically, Samatha tricks your ego which is naturally geared to follow the Thinking-fast system. This logic is not from the scripture, but I believe it is logical for us to view Samatha meditation this way to make sense of the purpose of the practice. The patterns and make-up of various formats of Samatha meditation, justify and support this view.

Q: Your explanation makes much sense. How about Vipassana meditation?

A: By analyzing the make-up of Vipassana which is called “insight meditation”, it becomes very clear that it is the stream of meditation that helps to cultivate all the elements of the Noble Eightfold Path. In Vipassana meditation the focus is on watching the birth of a thought and staying consciously with the process of producing a thought or emotion. Here, the deliberate attention to see through the whole thinking process is paramount. It is not an easy task. Hence, during training, in most instances what happens is, the thought that has already been made is re-evaluated further before

finalizing the succeeding thought. Vipassana meditation is a detailed training exercise that covers the aspects of what is to be done during the process of finalizing a thought. The task is to watch the steps of generation of your thought deliberately without letting it escape or go astray or let it go back to the Thinking-fast system and take control over the process. Basically, Vipassana meditation helps to keep improving the Thinking-slow system. A person who is well-trained in Vipassana meditation is said to have skills to identify the four mind-based aggregates of the thought process, like a prism that separates white light into colors. Such a person will deal with each aggregate or each constituent appropriately with the focus of eliminating suffering producing elements created within the aggregates, to ensure production of suffering free thoughts and emotions that we experience and feel. Vipassana meditation brings the control aspect as well as the deliberate participation in the development of the thinking process. This is why both Right Mindfulness and Right concentration complement each other.

We need to bear in mind, that it is the Noble Eightfold Path, that becomes the podium to attain the state of Enlightenment and not the meditation. Cessation of suffering is not possible without the growth of wholesome ethical elements like Right Speech. Meditation is the vital integral training facet that is required for the development and practice of the eight elements of the path. As the “Pali” language word “bavana” for meditation defines, it is the “cultivation” of our mind process. It is another way of activating thoughtful thinking by dedicated training and tweaking the thinking circuitry.

Q: You said Vipassana meditation will identify the four mind-based aggregates of the thought process. Can you explain that further?

A: Yes. We need to understand, that the brain circuits that run various thinking programs including accessing our past memories, are all made of biological cell circuits operated by electro chemical mechanisms. The formation of all these circuits or networks, happens all the time with the connections and disconnections of synapses of the brain cells. Exploring the brain's anatomical structure is an interesting field of study that's worth mentioning here, but we'll not go into any such stuff as we are not experts in that field.

The Buddha referred to the following four: feeling, perception (identifying), choice (or intention) and awareness (or consciousness) as the stages of the thought generation process. When any of the six streams of inputs enters our brain, first we have a 'feeling' of the input. The 'consciousness' element is essential to have the feeling. The feelings which occur in the environment of consciousness, immediately trigger the identification of the input to form a 'perception' of it. This leads to arising of 'choices' or intentions on how to deal with the input. All these functions occur under the umbrella of consciousness and hence form the 'awareness' of its happening. The brain circuitries that have been developed from day one, facilitate consciousness, feelings, perceptions, choices and awareness of the thinking. All these functions have a direct association with the past information and experiences that we have stored in our memories. As all these four stages happen at lightning speed, we cannot identify the sequence of these elements occurring separately. However, training in Vipassana meditation helps to improve this cognition process and in recognizing the involvement of these elements as we generate our thoughts and emotions.

As mentioned before, all the processing of inputs and production of thoughts and emotions happens in a “conscious environment.” However, the conscious environment doesn’t mean much for a person who is looking to improve thinking, as most thoughts and emotions are habitually produced through the automatic mode, the “Thinking-fast” system. The second factor is the conscious environment under which all these take place is obviously influenced by the past conditioning of our psyche. Hence, what is required is to bring forth is ‘deliberate thinking’ into the thinking process. Training on Vipassana meditation helps to enhance attention to all the mental elements in an intentional thoughtful manner. As thoughts are generated at lightning speed, as a beginner, the thoughts so generated can be re-evaluated, critiqued and processed again and again to refine and improve the succeeding outcomes. As per the Buddhist teachings what is to be incorporated in the deliberate thinking process are the ingredients of the Noble Eightfold Path. Hence, it’s the Vipassana meditation that can help us to incorporate the ingredients of the Noble Eightfold Path into our thinking circuitries.

Mahacattarisaka Sutta, Sallekha Sutta and Lomasakangiya-bhaddekaratta Sutta are some of the sermons in Buddhist scripture that explains the details of the purpose and focus of the meditative streams that validate this rational analysis. *Madhupindika sutta* elaborates how the streams of inputs get processed in the mind of a lay person and in an Enlightened person. The chattering of the mind that leads to splintering in the thinking process is defined in the Buddhist teaching by the Pali language word “*papancha*.” This phenomenon is spelled-out in this sutta. The Buddhist scholars define “*papancha*” as conceptual proliferation. Basically, it is about how an input coming to our mind bursts into form several permutations and combination

of ideas. That's the nature of our mind. Meditation helps to calm down these tendencies and take control over thinking.

Q: How did the five ascetics attain Enlightenment without practicing meditation?

A: Being ascetics I believe they would have had ample experience in meditation. They would have been extremely good in controlling their minds and hence wouldn't have had any issues in understanding the Buddha's teachings as they ought to be understood. However, according to scripture there have been thousands of lay people who had no experience in meditation, who are reported to have achieved Enlightenment merely by listening to the sermons of the Buddha. This is another aspect that we need to think out loud with our rational hats on.

Q: What are the roles of Right View and Right Intention, which come under the sub-category "Wisdom Development" in the Noble Eightfold Path?

A: Wisdom development is fundamental to the Buddhist teachings. In short, the Buddha pronounced that the cause for unhappiness is the greed that arises due to ignorance. Wisdom is the ultimate solution to attain detachment from greed. Right View and Right Intention are vital steps in understanding the reality, specifically the concept of non-self. These two tasks are fundamental to rational thinking.

Quite coincidentally, at the beginning of this discussion, Right View is what drew our attention to have a logical insight into the content in the Noble Eightfold Path. At the beginning of this discussion, it was Right View that led us to look into the conditioning process of prince Siddhartha's mind, to understand the story of the Buddha in a rational manner. Right View and

Right Intention were why we wanted to understand the conditioning process of our brain from day one of our life. With a concerted effort if we continue exercising, Right View and Right Intention in a broader manner, we should be able to ascertain a deep perspective on the materialistic and non-materialistic aspects of life.

Q: What is wisdom development?

A: During Buddha's time, the question as to what is wisdom, came up on various occasions. Once, this question was specifically asked by a fellow monk, from arahant Sariputta. His answer is disclosed in *Mahaveddala Sutta*. It is a comprehensive and a lengthy explanation, given in a Q&A format. In summary, the answer was basically woven around the development of abilities to analyze the processing of the six streams of inputs, whilst identifying the basic mind fractions namely feelings, perception, intention and consciousness. During wisdom development, the focus should be on identifying the ingredients that are causing unhappy feelings during the thought generation process and then to concentrate on eliminating or substituting those causes with the elements of the Noble Eightfold Path.

By attaining Enlightenment what the Buddha essentially experienced was the effacement of ignorance through awakening to reality. On many occasions the Buddha attributed this experience to his discovery of the Four Noble Truths and understanding of the principle of interdependent co-arising, that is known as "Paticca-Samuppada" in Pali language.

Q: What is interdependent co-arising or “Paticca-Samuppada”?

A: Dependent origination or interdependent co-arising is a natural phenomenon and it explains the steps governing our existence. This law of conditionality is based on the following formula.

*“Where there is this, there is that
With the arising of this, that arises
Where this is not, that is not
With the ceasing of this, that ceases”*

Based on the above formula, the Buddha derived the following logical phases to show the dynamism of our consciousness.

Conditioned by Ignorance, Volitional activities arise
Conditioned by Volitional activities Consciousness arises
Conditioned by Consciousness, Mind and matter arises
Conditioned by Mind and matter, the Six-fold base arises
Conditioned by the Six-fold base, Contact arises
Conditioned by the Contact, Feeling arises
Conditioned by Feeling, Craving arises
Conditioned by Craving, Grasping arises
Conditioned by Grasping, Becoming arises
Conditioned by Becoming, Birth arises
Conditioned by Birth, aging, death, sorrow, pain, grief and despair arise.

Q: Can you explain application of this with an example?

A: It is to be considered as a cyclic process. However, some scholars, explain this formulation as cyclic as well as a complex interwoven network process.

It touches the birth and death elements. It is also known as the theory of “Cause and effect.”

As a simple example, say that you have a craving for a luxury car. That craving, ultimately results in arising of grief when you are unable to have it. As long as you have the car in your mind, the above logical elements keep forming linking each another continuously and repeats in a cyclic manner. As long as the “Car-input” exists, the grief for “Car-output” exists. The moment the “Car- input” is taken off from your system the “Car-output” vanishes; thus, the grief ceases to exist. As the words imply in “cause and effect” theory, it is how it’s being taught. The simple meanings of the two Pali words translate as “Influences (Paticca) of Inputs (Samuppada)”.

Q: You said Right View and Right Intention are vital steps to understand the reality, specially the concept of non-self. Can we go into this?

A: I like to answer your question in several stages as it is good to go deep into the non-self concept. First of all, there is a wrong idea by some people that the mind or the thinking process exists outside the brain. One reason for this is, because the Buddha didn’t make any references to the brain as the function of the brain was not known at that time.

The second reason is that even after we got to know recently that thinking takes place in the brain, no-one can still pin point where the mind is. Technically, as we discussed earlier there is no entity called mind. Mind is like a verb. It is impossible to show a process happening in the brain. Mind is really the thought generation process with the subconscious feelings the

brain carries all the time. The subconscious feeling is due to all the essential sub-programs that are running in the background of the brain, all the time.

Q: Sorry for the interruption. What do you mean by sub-programs running in the back ground of the brain?

A: When we come to this world the brain is almost like a clean slate. As we grow, we gradually develop the physical and mental programs that are required to get on with our lives. For example, an infant need about three months to see things properly. First the infants get subject to the confusion created by the bombardment of vast arrays of visual signals never seen before coming through the eyes from the time they open their eyes. But within about the first three months they tackle this problem by gradually sorting-out to identify the objects. After developing the picture identification programs in the brain, the confusion goes off. Thereafter the program keeps improving and is always kept in readiness to receive visual signals when the eyes are open. Similarly, all of our sensory signal identification programs and the programs for motor skills get developed in the brain. These programs need to run in the background of the brain all the time, kept in readiness for routine actions. For example, the ear related programs make us hear when there is a sound. To hear all the sounds, the program has to be “on.” The walking program makes us walk when certain brain signals are directed to do so. These programs are the programs I meant as sub-programs.

Q: OK, I understand. So, all those sub-programs running give the feel of consciousness. Right?

A: Yes, that’s right. Going back to our topic, it is meaningless to say the thinking process can function outside the brain. This is evident when all our thinking stops when these programs cease to function, under full anesthetic conditions. It is interesting to note that there are two types of anesthetizing

methods. One method stops the input sensors and the other method stops the input processing. Doctors use both these methods as required. If we are partial anesthetized due to an error, our sensors and our thinking process can still function like in a dreaming situation. The out of body experiences that some patients claimed to have experienced, happens mostly under partial anesthetic conditions. Character changes have been observed in people who have had brain injuries, proving the fact that the self we consider as self is very much connected to the brain. If we intoxicate our brain with alcohol or drugs, then our thinking can change dramatically. If we don't get the 6th input at the appropriate time in our life, our brains will not develop for us to behave like normal humans. Rare incidents of children raised by animals, proves this fact. In such cases doctors have found that it is impossible to correct them in later life. People with down-syndrome, have a different mental composure.

Thinking is a process. Processes don't get old. Hence, provided that our brains are healthy, we always feel young even at a very old age. However, as we grow old, some sectors of the brain could become weak due to aging, thus putting us into conditions like that of patients with Alzheimer's disease. One has to understand, if the brain is transplanted like the other human organs, it will come with the mind programs of the donor. As in science fiction, if a brain is duplicated and transplanted into two people, those two will momentarily generate similar thoughts. But that will not last long and gradually they will become two individuals because of the different conditions they will meet thereafter.

Q: Assuming that thinking happens in the brain, give me scientific reasons to accept the non-self concept?

A: I will give you a few scientific viewpoints on this. First, I like to quote from an interesting article titled “The Electric Brain” that was presented as a dialogue between Dr. Llinás and NOVA. The article points out that the nervous system first came about when cells decided to evolve from plant life into animal life, millions of years ago. Animals needed a nervous system as they are oriented to a life style where movement is essential. The nervous system accommodates the movement, different environments and behavioral conditions. Dr. Llinás explains that consciousness is the sum of perceptions of the consensus derived by the cells when the cells started to talk to one another, a long time ago. He further states - “We assume that we have free will and we make decisions, but we don't. Neurons in our brains do. We decide that this sum total driving us is a decision we have made for ourselves. But it is not.” And he goes on; “The brain is made of cells. These are a very distinguished group of cells, about 550 million or more years old. These cells have a small mass. Our brain has 10^{10} cells, which is a huge number, ten billion cells. And each cell (Neuron) has 1,000 to 10,000 of synapses that form the connections between the cells. So, the brain has trillions of synapses. Neurons like one another very much. They respond to one another's messages, so they basically chat all day, like people do in society. One set of neurons talks to another set of neurons, and they talk back, so we have dialogues between different components in the brain. The dialogue is not between one cell and another cell, but rather between many cells and many other cells. It's like having a huge number of people holding hands, dancing together, making ever-changing circles and organized together in such a way that every cell belongs, at some time, to some circle. It's like a huge square dance. Each dancer belongs to a particular movement at a particular time.” All this clever work is orchestrated by a complex

network of neural cells. Hence, it leads us to the conclusion that it is the complex brain networks that are responsible for the operation of the mind-body system. The operation of the networks is done by the conglomeration of cell-networks without receiving directions from a single commander or any single entity in it. The constantly changing network arrays of these tiny communication entities keeps our life operation including thinking running.

The problem we have is, “our being the network system,” it is our inability to recognize the reality of this fact because we are inclined to the idea of self that the network system creates. In other words, all the activities executed by the cells’ networking arrays, the dancing taking place, projects a pseudo feeling of a commanding role of a self. One more contributing reason for the idea of a commander could be that most things we experience in life are always found pivoted around commander driven systems.

Q: Can you give an example to understand a commander-less operating system other than the explanation given above?

A: Yes. Look into the social behavioral pattern of bees and ants. Their colonies operate on commander-less systems. There are a lot of similarities in the functioning of a bee colony, to our brain-body functioning system. In each bee colony there is a queen. The queen’s main function is to lay eggs. Other than the queen, there are drones and worker bees. All worker bees have different tasks to perform at various stages of their life span. The amazing fact is that the bees are not commanded by anybody; not even by the queen. Each bee is like a pre-programmed robot. They function via a network of communication systems that prevail in the colony. Their systems are not governed by a commander. For example, if there is a threat to the colony by intruders, the alarm system is set to go off by releasing a particular

chemical from their bodies. According to studies, once this chemical is sensed by the bees each bee knows what to do in these situations. If the signal is to fight the intruders, then a particular set of bees will fight. If the first squadron of their army is losing the battle another set will join them. But strangely there is not a single commanding officer to summon the second set of bees or to give commands at the battle. It is an automated system. This behavioral pattern which functions without a commander is amazing. These behavioral patterns do exist with ants and other insects too.

Though I cannot equate a human brain cell to a bee as the bees are made of millions of cells, this leaderless operational phenomenon has a direct correlation to our complex array of brain cells networking system which somewhat helps to understand the non-self concept. Probably the consciousness of each cell and the decision-making cell-network systems may be a generic phenomenon in the world, even expanding to the function of the microbial life forms. As this example shows us it is the functioning of the networks of millions of cells that's in control, not a single commander or entity or flux that we can identify as "self."

Q: What were you trying to say by saying that this commander-less phenomenon could be extended to microbial life forms?

A: I like to leave aside microbial life forms like bacteria as I am not familiar with those. But just take an amoeba for example. When an amoeba wants food, it surrounds the food particle with its cell wall and then absorbs it to the single cell it has. Who takes that decision? It seems like each and every cell is conscious in making decisions and knows what to do to cope with life situations. When we have an injury the cells around the injury organize the remedial actions, without getting any directions from a commander or even contacting the brain. The very first single cell created by our parents knew

how to create us from the moment it formed. Leaving apart all these interesting aspects, the commander-less operation of our mind-body system explains the non-self concept, the Buddha discovered. The applicability of this principle is widely supported by the modern research done by many renowned neuroscientists like Dr. Antonio Damasio, Dr. Wolf Joachim Singer, Dr. Bruce Lipton and many others, making it more into a scientifically accepted phenomenon.

Q: If the non-self concept is so simple to understand why don't we understand it?

A: No. It is not easy to understand. Naturally we oppose accepting the existence of this phenomenon as it ousts the ego-based self that we infer from our continuous conditioning, through the flood of signals we receive, and emotions and feelings we experience from our childhood. For a common person, any explanation driven towards non-self, will obviously bring about feelings that it is not right, as it leads to a mind-boggling issue. This is one reason why the Buddha used the conventional truth and ultimate truth principle to explain the concept to help in grasping it to some extent.

Q: OK. Assuming the non-self concept is true, what is the benefit in understanding it?

A: Understanding it, is necessary for cessation of unhappiness.

Q: How?

A: Our greed for sensual pleasures which are in fact centered around the idea of self, creates all the suffering or unhappiness. Attachment due to the greed for pleasure, is centered on an idea of "I"- defined as *Sakkaya ditthi* in Pali language. I like to remind again it is the mental stream of unhappiness we

are considering here. Technically, there is no unhappiness related to a self. What we do is, we grab the unhappy thoughts & emotions, and immediately attach them to a self-made self.

Consider you are watching a movie and assume that you are fully absorbed in it. After a while you will start experiencing real emotions, shedding tears or having joy because of the events performed by the pseudo characters created by the clever author of the movie. Strangely, this happens even while watching cartoon films. Although you knew very well all these characters were unreal fabrications even before you started watching the movie, you were generating emotional thoughts to keep your mind burning. This is due to the “Influences (Paticca) of Inputs (Samuppada).” But if you were mindful of the reality of what you were watching, you wouldn’t have experienced any of those emotional feelings. Self is a similarly fabricated character that we have created like the cartoon character, and we mistakenly think such a self exists. But, no sooner the idea of non-self is understood, then, there is a realization of the reality of sensual feelings and the absurdity of its attachment to a non-real entity. This deep understanding, causes awakening and the experiencing of Enlightenment. This is what the five ascetics realized.

Q: Your explanation makes sense to me. Why can’t non-self be experienced simply?

A: Understanding of non-self is to be acquired through self-insight and experiential realization. Understanding non-self in a philosophical sense might lead in the proper direction, but the philosophical understanding alone doesn’t result in experiential realization that leads to cessation of unhappiness.

Q: What is the method that should be developed to experience non-self?

A: Though the Buddha preached in Kalama Sutta and wanted everyone to be rational, he also said that a certain degree of faith is required in his Dharma if one seeks to benefit from it. So, the Buddha said when looking at the Dharma, not to look at it with an ulterior motive of finding errors or faults but to look at them with a motive to understand and benefit from the Dharma. Hence, the Buddhist fundamentals that are the Four Noble Truths, Noble Eightfold path, concept of Non-self, phenomenon of impermanence and the formula of dependent origination should be perceived in that backdrop.

To understand the concept of non-self we need to go back to review the answer the Buddha gave to Anuruddha, linking the Khandhas. It is through meditation that the thought forming system can be sliced and diced to the five constituents: form, feeling, perception, fabrication and consciousness. Insight meditation promotes understanding that all of those combined; or a combination of some of those or any of those aggregates individually, can't be construed as self. Vipassana meditation is like having an internal dialogue within yourself. When practiced methodically, one will be able to go through the following stages of experience. The first stage of practice will bring forth experience in observing the thought generation process; at the second stage, the slicing and dicing of this process will allow recognition of feelings, perception, fabrication and consciousness; progressing into the third stage, will allow involvement with the process of controlling the thoughts, and the fourth stage will allow relating what all were realized to impermanence, conditionality, suffering and non-self phenomena. Practicing Vipassana consistently helps in conditioning your thinking and bringing about the awareness of the fact of impermanence, conditioning, suffering and non-self

nature of our existence. Consideration of the five aggregates as a collection of five changing processes brings clarity to understand them better.

Q: Aren't there any other meditation streams the Buddha has disclosed?

A: There are others like “*Maitrī*” meditation and “*Satipatthana*” meditation. The meditation centered on loving-kindness is known as “*Maitrī*” meditation, it helps to develop the ethical elements (speech, livelihood, action, effort) of the Noble Eightfold Path. “*Satipatthana*” meditation belongs to the Vipassana meditation category and its practice is particularly focused on mindfulness and realization of the impermanent nature of the body and its components. It also emphasizes on the development of mental alertness like in Samatha meditation.

Q: How will you explain the Enlightenment?

A: I will use some of the things we already discussed to give an idea of Enlightenment. The Buddha is a prime example to ascertain the potential to which the human thinking process can be developed to eliminate unhappiness. The Buddha was in full control of the thought generation process. Hence the Buddha could relate all thought forming constituents to conditioning, non-self, impermanence and suffering. This experiential “awakening” achieved by the Buddha caused, cessation of suffering in the mental stream. To explain Enlightenment through the “Thinking fast” and “Thinking slow” concepts, the Buddha really eliminated the Thinking fast system and automated the Thinking slow system to produce thoughts and emotional feelings without any elements of suffering in them.

The Buddha experienced a center-less life and saw reality with the absence of an “I” in it. Based on this experiential realization the Buddha advocated,

one to be a refuge unto oneself, and also said that he is not a source for salvation to anybody. On many occasions the Buddha emphasized that his teaching is about understanding the nature of suffering and how to end suffering. The first two Suttas of the Buddha, unfold the crux of his teachings. The Buddha as well as the five ascetics definitely understood the reality of the delusional structure of self and applied that realization to center-less experience that brought the cessation of the mental stream of suffering.

One of the important points the Buddha said was, that although Enlightenment was attained by gradual conditioning of the thinking process, the ultimate experience accomplished would not be subjected to any conditioning. Hence Enlightenment is referred to as an “Unconditioned Dharma.” According to scripture, a person who achieves the state of Nibbana which is the total extinction of suffering, lives in a supreme psychological bliss of experience with supreme happiness, serenity, liberation and peace.

Q: If you think that the first two Suttas contain the crux of Buddhist Dharma, why did the Buddha disclose a vast array of other Dharma constituents in the teachings?

A: The Buddha really wanted to propagate his message to a wide audience and hence took an effective leadership role in his mission to propagate the Dharma to the maximum extent. The Buddha definitely inherited leadership qualities in his genes. Hence, just like a conqueror or leader with a mission, the mission he started with the five ascetics was boosted to the highest extent possible. Inclusion of variety, choice and substance in the Dharma were part of the strategy of the mission.

After the Buddha launched his mission to propagate the Dharma with the five ascetics, he continued it for 45 more years. So, invariably during this time the Buddha had to add numerous follow up disclosures to support his teachings, advice his followers where necessary, answer the questions asked by the people, deal with the dignitaries of the areas he visited, tackle various situations risen in the community of monks and also at the same time perform the leadership role for the community of monks. Most of the Suttas we find in the Dharma are the products related to all the above.

However, to answer your question in regard to the wide array of Dharma he preached, I need to quote again the example of the lotus pond that helped the Buddha to decide about teaching his Dharma. As the Buddha realized the people are of various intellectual capacities, the depth of Dharma had to be tailor made to the audiences. Also, he knew the same concepts expressed in different ways could help some people to understand the Dharma, better. This is one reason for the wide array. The second reason was, it was important to teach the ways and means of how to train and develop the practices to achieve the Dharma goals. In addition to these Dharma related reasons, there were other special reasons behind numerous discourses.

Q: Can you give some examples and reasons for the array of Dharma?

A: I said about *Jathaka* tales, earlier. They were specifically not directed to people of high intellectual level but for a majority of lay people at that time. The reason for the Jathaka tales is twofold. One reason was to go with the popular belief on reincarnation without disturbing the psyches of the listeners. By mixing the rebirth concept in the tales, what the Buddha did was to embed his message to encourage the people to do wholesome deeds. The use of Jathaka tales helped people to remember such messages easily and also to communicate them to others. Then there were discourses

specifically made, associating certain situations the Buddha encountered. As examples, the story of Kisagothami where she lost her two children; interpretation of dreams seen by King of Kosala; transformation of ruthless brigand Angulimala to seek ordination as a monk, etc., are some of those. In the story of King of Kosala, I don't presume the Buddha believed in dreams, but I presume the Buddha interpreted the dreams, purely for the psychotherapeutic purpose which helped the King to get relief from his stressful situation. The Buddha included disciplinary rules required for the community of monks. The Buddha also disclosed the wholesome things that the people should do and the principles of good governance for the kings to practice.

Q: Other than the core concepts given in the first two Suttas, are there other principal elements in the teachings?

A: Yes. There are a lot more in Buddhist teaching. Other than the core concepts given in the first two Suttas, the following Dharma constituents have become popular topics that would be worth discussing. Some of those are: the four distinct stages that one achieves on the way to Enlightenment, the “*jhana*” (stages achievable by the mind), five “*nivarana*” (hindrances) and *Abidharma*, though some claim *Abidharma* was added on a later date after the death of the Buddha. We can discuss them later.

Q: OK. What happens in the story of the Buddha, beyond the five ascetics who agreed to spread the fundamental Buddhist concepts that they learnt?

A: I can describe how the Buddha built up his community of monks for his mission.

Q: How?

A: The Buddha stayed with the five ascetics in the Deer-park at Issipathana as it was the rainy season. During this time a young son of a rich man in the neighborhood came to see him. His name was Yasa. He was depressed with his life of luxury and was wandering around when he accidentally happened to see the Buddha. The Buddha explained to him about generosity, morality, meditation, the evils of sensual pleasure, blessing of renunciation before going into details of the Dharma. Yasa was very pleased after he heard the Dharma and became a monk. Yasa's father who came looking for his son also became a follower of the Buddha after he ended up in the Deer-park and listened to the Dharma. The father invited the Buddha, the five ascetic monks and Yasa - the new monk, to his home for lunch next day. At the end of the lunch the Buddha preached to the gathering. Yasa's fifty-four friends were pleased with the Dharma and decided to become monks. Within a short time, all of them became arahants. With all of them the Buddha had sixty arahants for his mission of spreading the Dharma.

Q: What happened after the rains retreat at the Deer-park?

A: Just to understand the location of the Deer-park, the Buddha's birth place Lumbini was towards the north of Issipathana where the Deer-park was. Uruvela was about 140 miles south-eastward of Issipathana. That was where the Buddha attained Enlightenment.

The Buddha decided to go back to Uruvela after the rains retreat. Though the scripture does not specifically mention why he went back to Uruvela, the Buddha probably had a plan, because there were three Kassapa brothers who had 1000 disciples following their own spiritual philosophies. They were fire-worshippers and lived along the bank of the Neranjara River. First the Buddha visited Uruvela Kassapa, the eldest of the three brothers and asked

for accommodation for the night. He directed him to a hut in his premises, but he warned the Buddha about the vicious snake living in the hut. The Buddha spent the night in the hut. The following morning, to Uruvela Kassapa's amazement the Buddha showed him the snake which he had tamed and it was lying motionlessly in his food bowl. This leads them to have a conversation. The discussion led the Buddha to explain his Dharma to Uruvela Kassapa. After listening to Buddha's teachings Uruvela Kassapa and his 500 disciples became followers of the Buddha. After that the Buddha visited Uruvela Kassapa's brothers Nadi Kassapa and then Gaya Kassapa who had 300 and 200 followers respectively. The discourse the Buddha preached to Kassapas is called the Fire Sermon or *Adittapariyaya Sutta* in Pali. This is recorded as the 3rd Sutta disclosed by the Buddha. In summary the Buddha compared all six streams of pleasure sources to flames of fires made of desire, anger and delusion. For example, the Buddha said that the eye is burning because of its insatiable appetite for sights. The Buddha touched on *Paticca-Samuppada* and emphasized the importance of disenchantment with all these sources of the fires, as the path leading to the attainment of Enlightenment. All of them became followers of the Buddha after listening to the teachings. Though the Buddhist scripture says that all in the groups became arahants, we may need to take it with a pinch of salt as it makes one wonder whether all of them were more intelligent than the five ascetics who had to listen to two suttas to become arahants!

After that, the Buddha visited King Bimbisara in Rajagaha which was about 30 miles North of Uruvela. He knew King Bimbisara well and this visit was to fulfill a promise he made. The Kassapas and the group of 1000 new monks who were arahants now, accompanied the Buddha. At the palace, the King and the others were wondering whether the Buddha had become a follower

of Kassapas'. Realizing this, Uruvela Kassapa immediately pronounced that they became the followers of the Buddha. The King Bimbisara presented the first monastery to the Buddha. It was the Bamboo Wood monastery that is famously known as 'Veļuvana-aramaya'. The Buddha stayed at this monastery for some time. During this time at the Bamboo Wood monastery, two friends named Kolitha and Upathissa came to see the Buddha. After listening to the Buddha, they wanted to become monks and they were ordained with the names Sariputta and Mahamoggallana. It was one of the five ascetics, arahant Assaji that Upathissa met first and listened to the Dharma he preached. Arahant Assaji said to Upathissa that he was new to the training of the Dharma and hence recommended him to see the Buddha at the Bamboo Wood monastery. Before they were ordained under the Buddha, Upathissa and Kolitha were followers of a spiritual teacher named Sanjaya Belatthiputta, who was a religious leader like Mahavira. He was considered a great skeptic, and was said to be able to wriggle like an eel in words when it comes to answering questions. Mahavira was the founder of the Jain religion. Mahavira and the Buddha had a lot in common in their life stories as well as in their doctrines. But they were considered rivals and the scripture doesn't speak good about Mahavira though he was a peaceful leader whose religion was the first to preach Ahimsa or non-violence.

Upathissa and Kolitha's joining the Buddha, prompted 250 pupils of Sanjaya's followers to join the Buddha. This started a rivalry between the two groups. Sariputta and Mahamoggallana became arahants within a short time after completion of their sanctity. According to scripture, Sariputta took more time than Mahamoggallana to understand the analytical aspects of the Dharma before he became an arahant. The Buddha then decided to appoint them as his two chief disciples. These appointments led to some displeasure among the monks, as to why those two positions were not given either to the

five senior ascetics who were the most senior Arahants or the Kassapa brothers who were the next in seniority as arahants in the community of monks. The Buddha settled the issue by narrating a story about their past births aeons ago. According to this story, at a time of a past Buddha, both these friends with names Sarada and Sirivadhaka were born into Brahmin caste and, had an aspiration to become the “Chief Disciples” of the present Buddha. The Buddha said it was that aspiration that destined them to hold those two positions. Accordingly, Kondanna’s aspiration during the same past Buddha was to become the first “arahant” under the present Buddha, and hence the Buddha explained that he too achieved what he aspired to become. I suggest that we have to look at these explanations with our thinking hats on, as we already shed some light on the past Buddhas.

Q: Is this the first instance that the Buddha related events of a significant nature of past births?

A: No. The scripture has similar stories relating to the Kassapa brothers and Yasa, too. In short, in the case of the Kassapa brothers, they had sojourned among the heavens and the earth in their past lives, before being born into a brahmin family to become spiritual leaders. Yasa had been a King during the time of Sumeda Buddha.

Q: Do you think these are frills?

A: Here, we need to think aloud in analyzing what made the Buddha preach nothing about rebirth in the first two Suttas, but then switch over to preach stories relating to the past births of most disciples who joined his mission. We discussed rebirth before. However, we can have an overview of the reality of this concept and the reason why the Buddha took this course of action.

First of all, if the Buddha had supernormal powers to be aware of the lineage of all these past births, why would the Buddha have initially hesitated as to whether he should go ahead teaching the Dharma. Secondly, according to the Suttas these past births had taken place aeons (aeon = 4.32 million yrs) ago. So, basically, none of those could have happened on this earth, as we know the earliest known civilization existed only around 8,000 yrs ago. Before that going back to 20,000 years, we just became hunter-gatherers from the hunter stage due to our brain growth. We were very primitive before 100,000 yrs ago. Thirdly, the concept of rebirth seems to negate the concept of non-self, preached by the Buddha; the very concept many modern scientists support. We discussed the non-self concept at length and we understand the self as a delusion, we create. The explanation the Buddha gave after he was compelled to answer the question about the existence of the Buddha after death, clarifies his stand on afterlife with clarity expressed on selflessness and meaninglessness of the inquiry into life after death.

We need to understand that a Sutta like *Annattalakkana Sutta*, would have been very appropriate for the five ascetics who were intelligent and well grounded in their knowledge, but it wouldn't have been palatable to a large percentage of disciples who joined the community of monks with their firm beliefs in rebirth or reincarnation.

Considering the wide popularity of this belief at that time, it seems to me that the Buddha purposely used the rebirth concept to its maximum benefit to spread his Dharma. This strategy, not only helped to pass the Dharma to his followers, but it also helped the Buddha many ways including to explain a lot of complex issues without vexing the psyches of the lay personnel, in understanding the unique non-self concept. The life beyond death, gave a lot

of hope to people to see the continuum of life. Almost all the religions in the world preach this idea as the human psyche loves this concept.

Analyzing the rebirth concept further, if we assume that greed and karma are the main drivers attributed to the creation of the next birth, then we need to wonder as to what caused the very first birth of a living being on earth. Also, the assumption of rebirth means, the sum of all living beings in the universe start with a finite number and that number of lives always remain the same through the cycles of births and deaths. Even if we agree on the idea of a finite number, then as to “what” created each of our very first life, has to be answered. If God is the answer as many religions proclaim, then which God is this or who created God comes up as a big question to answer.

Buddhism uses the word rebirth instead of reincarnation to strike a difference as the latter relates to a soul. With non-self concept that bars the soul theory, the Buddha had to give an explanation as to what creates the next birth. The scripture relates the last thought of the person at the moment of death, as the link or the seed to the next birth. This idea contravenes logic because if we consider the last thought as the link, basically it doesn't seem to operate as a “link of a chain” but seems like carrying the whole “chain” comprised of karma, past memories, inspirations, aspirations, connections with the past, etc.

Also, there is another view as to what creates the next birth by relating it to a Pali term *Pancha Upadana Khandha* or five grasping aggregates. The examples listed at the end, correspond to each aggregate; form, feelings, perception, formation and awareness, give an idea as to how the delusional birth of “I” comes into existence in our life:

1. I can see myself in the mirror,
2. I am sad,
3. I am a Buddhist. I am married,
4. I am in control of my life. I will scold him. I will donate this to charity.
5. I know what's going on in my mind and why I am making all these decisions.

This approach holds that the clinging to the idea of “I”, causes the continuation of the life journey to the next life. The reality however is that every experience is made up of the five aggregates, and arises and ceases without a remainder. Nothing is truly reborn, ever. In every moment of life there is a birth of a thought followed by a death and whether that principle can act as a seed for a future life after death is very improbable.

Lastly, we need to understand that humans wouldn't have been living today, if the meteorite that killed all the dinosaurs didn't hit the earth as it was the event that made the mammals dominate the earth and made way for the evolution process that created primates. All religions should really evaluate the significance of that event to review the impact it has on the creation story of man.

Q: You cover the rebirth aspect quite well. Anything else to add?

A: In Kalama Sutta, it says even not to believe the Buddha's words without evaluating the facts rationally. This is exactly what we are doing here. It is important to understand what would have happened to Buddha's mission, if the Buddha didn't include the concept of re-birth in his teachings? Any religious teaching without belief in an afterlife won't appeal to people as it diminishes the hope of life beyond this life. The contemporaries of the

Buddha who did not support the idea of after-life did not succeed in their missions.

Rebirth and Karma are good stimulants for the human psyche. Even non-eastern religious believers, somewhat accept Karma as a principle of life, not because it is factual but it fits certain situations of life as an explanation that cannot be proved or disproved. The Buddha used both those concepts with a good intention focused on the betterment of the followers, without compromising his findings entirely.

Q: What happened next in the story of Buddha?

A: During the stay at Bamboo Wood monastery, a few more dignitaries were ordained as monks.

After spending about five months at Bamboo Wood monastery, it was spring time, and the Buddha received an invitation from his father to visit his hometown, Kapilavatthu. The city of Kapilavatthu was at least 200 miles to the northwest of Rajagaha where the Bamboo Wood monastery was located. The Buddha accepted the invitation and hundreds of monks joined him on this long journey.

After visiting the palace of King Sudhodana for three consecutive days, the Buddha converted his former wife Yasodara and his father to become his followers, and ordained his 7 yr old son Rahula. Many other family members, including his step brother Nanda and cousin Ananda who became his personal assistant later on, were ordained into the community of monks. The scripture says prince Nanda, was planning to have his wedding and crowning on the following day. But Nanda who carried Buddha's food bowl to the place where the Buddha was staying, couldn't refuse the request when

the Buddha asked him to become a monk. Meanwhile, Princess Yasodara was very depressed about Buddha's act of ordaining Prince Rahula. This incident led to King Sudhodana to request the Buddha not to ordain any children in the future without the consent of their parents. The Buddha agreed and established this as a rule to follow. Meanwhile Nanda who became a monk was obviously very depressed for not being able to marry his sweet heart.

Q: Do you think what the Buddha did to prince Rahula was correct?

A: With a rational mind I find it is difficult to understand why the Buddha did ordain Rahula though many Buddhists justify that action giving various reasons. King Sudhodana would have been a very unhappy man after losing both Rahula and Nanda. My personal view is, it is not proper to ordain children until they reach adulthood as children are naive about worldly things. The monk community hardly has any parenting experience that is necessary to bring up children. I think the biggest reason for the deterioration of Buddhism today is due to parents virtually handing over some of their children to Buddhist temples to ordain them as monks, thinking it is a wholesome act to gain merit and a great service that they are doing to Buddhism.

Q: Do you think what the Buddha did to prince Nanda was good?

A: I believe Nanda was an adult. But he became a monk due to the enormous respect he had for the Buddha and not because of his will to become a monk. As the story goes, a few days later the Buddha realized Nanda was depressed as he was always thinking about princess Janapada Kalyani, who was to have become his wife. So, the Buddha took Nanda on a journey to Thawthisa Heaven. On the way Nanda saw a she-monkey that had lost her ears, nose and tail in a forest fire, clinging to a charred stump. When they reached the

heavenly abode, Nanda saw beautiful celestial nymphs and the Buddha asked Nanda: "Which do you consider more beautiful? Those nymphs or Janapada Kalyani?" Nanda replied: "Venerable Sir, Janapada Kalyani looks like the scalded she-monkey, compared to those nymphs." So, the Buddha encouraged him to get on with spiritual practices if he wanted to have a nymph as he saw in heaven. From there onwards Nanda is said to have practiced Buddhist Dharma diligently and become an arahant.

Q: What do you think about this story?

A: First, this is the first instance where it is mentioned in the scripture that the Buddha could travel to a heaven as he wished, although all the journeys the Buddha made up to this point were by foot. This opens up a lot of uncertainty on the special powers the scripture says that the Buddha had. The Buddha visited a heaven to preach to his mother too. So, we have to have an open mind when analyzing the validity of these citations. Secondly, the Buddha's advice to Nanda to practice Dharma with an objective of winning the celestial nymph, seems very un-Buddhist to me, though an ardent Buddhist might argue that it is for the betterment of Nanda. What comes to my mind is the 72 virgins said to be mentioned in Islam.

Q: I understand what you mean. What happens next in the story?

A: During the Buddha's stay at Kapilavattthu, a rich person named Anathapindika visited the Buddha and he invited the Buddha to his city of Shravasti which was about 100 miles westward of Kapilavattthu. On his visit to Shravasti, Anathapindika presented the Jeta's Wood monastery to the Buddha. Out of the 45 years of Buddha's teaching life, he spent most of the rain retreats at the Jeta-wood monastery. The Bamboo-Wood monastery in Rajagaha was the second in most time spent. These two were at least 500

miles apart. The Buddha had spent the rest of the rainy seasons at various other places including the 7th in Thawthisa Heaven, according to the texts. Most of the Suttas were disclosed at the Jetta-woods monastery, and the disciple Anathapindika had been looking after the Buddha and his community of monks very well with all the facilities including providing meals. The chronology of the Buddha's journeys gives the exact locations where the Buddha stayed in the first twenty rain retreats, but after that the records are sketchy. However, most of the significant events that happened during the life of the Buddha, have been duly carried over by the Suttas. The chronology is picked up again in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, which gives the details from one year before the death of the Buddha at the city of Kusinara.

Q: Can you tell us the details given in *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*?

A: Yes. *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, gives chronological details of what happened during the last year of the Buddha's life. This includes all significant events, including what led to ultimate demise of the Buddha, about who should lead the funeral arrangements, who participated in the funeral and how the Buddha's relics were distributed, etc. The Buddha was frail by this time as he was reaching 80 yrs. Looking at the map where he was, it seems like the Buddha was heading north to his home town from Rajagaha. The Buddha fell ill after eating some spoiled meat and that led to his demise. When the ailing Buddha asked for water to drink, the monks could not find clean drinking water in the vicinity to offer him. We discussed the gods providing him with robes when prince Siddhartha became an ascetic, but when he needed water to drink there was not a single god to offer him some drinking water – this is puzzling.

I like to show some more interesting things given in this Sutta to think over rationally. As disclosed in the Sutta, about one year prior to the demise of the Buddha, one day the Buddha and Ananda were getting ready to commence a joint meditation session. At this instant, the Buddha hinted at Ananda that if Ananda make a request then the Buddha could live an eon, for the benefit, welfare, and happiness of gods and humans. But Ananda couldn't catch this hint even after the Buddha repeated this hint twice more. The scripture states, since Ananda didn't make the request the Buddha decided to live only the period applicable to normal human life, instead of an eon that he could have lived using his supernormal powers. It is also stated in the Sutta, Ananda's mind was possessed by Mara at that time, thus preventing him making the request to the Buddha to live longer. Mara the demon of death; the lord of the four hells, just like God Sakkara the lord of 33,000 realms of heavens mentioned in canonical literature. Not long after Ananda moved away from the Buddha for some chore, Mara visited the Buddha to remind him that the time had come for the Buddha to become fully extinguished.

These types of narrations in the Buddhist scripture, not only take away the essence of the doctrine but obviously add more confusion than clarity, unless someone wants to believe in fairy tales. This is not the first instance where the story of Mara is mentioned in the scripture. *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* is not something the Buddha disclosed, but someone's version of what happened during the time. Incidentally, the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* that the Buddha disclosed to female disciple Visakha also mentions Mara. According to *Ariyapariyesana Sutta* Mara sent his three beautiful daughters to seduce the ascetic Siddhartha on the night when he was about to attain Enlightenment. Some texts say this happened after the Enlightenment.

However, after sending the daughters, Mara also had tried to scare the Buddha. But after all Mara's efforts had failed, Mara had finally it is said, accepted his defeat. A lot of details of Mara have been given in *Maratajjaniya Sutta*. Common sense will tell you it is a very childish tale.

Q: Definitely those seem to be frills. What do you have to say?

A: Obviously. But while these types of narratives make many people visualize these incidents as facts, there are many others who go into details to extract the real message embedded in the stories. For example, the names of the three daughters are, Thanha (Cravings), Rathi (Lust) and Raga (Sensuality) thus giving us an extra dimension to ponder beyond the literal narrative. Introduction of Mara seems to be an attempt to personify death to understand it in a different way. The personification of Mara is another format the Buddha used to deliver his message to the audiences.

Q: What else does the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* divulge?

A: The Buddha's last words had been "All component things in the world are changeable and not permanent. Work hard to gain your own salvation." According to the Sutta, a question had arisen as to who is going to lead the community of monks after the death of the Buddha. The Buddha didn't appoint a successor but told the monks to treat the Dharma he taught as the successor. Also, the Sutta has mentioned that the earth shook strongly at the moment the Buddha decided to fully disengage and also once more, at the very moment of his real death.

Q: Who led the funeral arrangements?

A: In regard to the funeral arrangements, Sariputta and Mahamoggallana the chief monk disciples were not living at that time. Mahakassapa was another renowned Arahant in the Buddhist literature who had leadership qualities

and won the respect of others. According to scripture the Buddha has commented about his composure, extra ordinary intelligence and leadership qualities. He was a Brahmin from Magadha. In one instance according to Buddhist literature Mahakassapa exchanged his robes with those of the Buddha as the Buddha had a liking for Mahakassapa's robes. This later created confusion among people. Some people mistakenly followed Mahakassapa as he was wearing the Buddha's old robe. To avoid this confusion Mahakassapa decided to isolate himself from the Buddha and moved to a distant place. At the time of the Buddha's death he was still living but was not available to lead the funeral arrangements. Anuruddha, the cousin of the Buddha and step brother to Ananda, played a major role in directing Ananda in getting the funeral organized. Many dignitaries took part in arranging and attending the funeral. According to the Sutta, on the final day there were difficulties in setting fire to the pyre, until Mahakassapa arrived at the site to pay his last respects. After Mahakassapa paid his respects the funeral pyre had burst into flames all by itself, according to the sutta.

Q: What happened to the monk community after the Buddha's demise?

A: The Buddha's death created a vacuum in the leadership. A few newcomers attempted to claim leadership. It was Mahakassapa who reminded everyone that the Buddha didn't want to have a rightful successor but to accept his teachings as the successor. Mahakassapa got the monk community united, controlled the situation, guided them with correct advice and deployed them in an organized manner to continue spreading the Dharma.

Q: Didn't Mahakassapa blame Ananda for being instrumental in establishing the ordination of women?

A: Yes. Mahakassapa has been very dismissive, almost abusive in his dealings with Ananda on this issue. It was Ananda who requested the Buddha to include women in the monk community. Ananda did this on behalf of prince Siddhartha's foster mother Mahapajapati Gotami who wanted the women including herself to be ordained. The Buddha refused Ananda's request twice, but finally agreed to establish the women monk's community when Ananda requested it for the third time. Mahakassapa knew this whole story. If this narration is true, I cannot understand this behavior of Mahakassapa as he was an Enlightened one. Also, as I have challenged earlier, if the Buddha had powers to foresee the future, why the Buddha strongly rejected the ordination of women a few times, is difficult to comprehend. I think ordination of women promoted equal rights to women, just like the opportunities given to men to join the community of monks, irrespective of their caste, creed and the other divisional factors that strongly prevailed in the Hindu society.

Q: What happened to Ananda, eventually?

A: A few months later, Ananda became an arahant with the encouragement given by Anuruddha and rendered a historically prominent role during the first Dharma council as the living memory of the Buddha's suttas, reciting many of the Buddha's disclosures and checking authenticity of Dharma where required. Ananda passed all his knowledge of Dharma to the monks Sanavasi and Majjhantika and died 20 years after the Buddha.

Q: Wasn't there an issue of as to what disciplinary action shall be taken against the monk Channa the prince's former horse minder who helped prince Siddhartha to leave the palace on the day he renounced his nobility?

A: Yes, as the story goes, he was a proud monk after he was ordained and didn't socialize with the others. The Buddha didn't have a solution to his strange behavior. During the last days of the Buddha the other monks approached the Buddha and asked as to what they should do to him. The Buddha said he should be given the prime punishment. When the monks asked what that was, the Buddha said not to talk, give instructions or advise him.

Q: What happened to Channa eventually?

A: He was supposed to have become an arahant as a result of self understanding of himself, after imposing this punishment.

Q: It's a strange punishment coming from the Buddha in his last moments of life. Right?

A: Yes.

Q: Don't you have anything else to say other than saying "yes"?

A: Channa would have been a very loyal person to prince Siddhartha as he didn't inform anything of the prince's renunciation of domestic life to King Suddhodana. Also, he may have provided information about Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputhra and helped the prince in many ways to plan the journey to Uruvela. So, he might have had big expectations from the Buddha. This is just my opinion.

Q: What are the significant incidents and other major Dharma disclosures that stand out in the period missed out from the chronological records?

A: The Buddha preached for 45 years and hence there are many important things that we can discuss.

Q: Can you talk about the other Buddhist doctrinal aspects that we haven't discussed already.

A: We can go through some of the important ones. The Buddha spoke about four distinct mental facets of achievement, on the way to Enlightenment. These four facets are named as *Sovan*, *Sakadagami*, *Anagami* and *Arahant*. The first stage, *Sovan or Sothapanna* is defined as the 'stage of stream enterer'. This is a perceptible distinct stage. According to scripture, once this stage is achieved, within seven births subsequent to the present birth, that person will become fully Enlightened. *Sakadagami* stage is defined as a returner to human realm, once more. *Anagami* stage is defined as a non-returner, but be born in a heavenly place before becoming fully Enlightened in the last birth. *Arahant*, the fourth stage is full awakening or Enlightenment. Some literature states that when a layman attains arahant-hood he must become a monk. If he is unable to find a robe and bowl then he will cease to exist. I am not sure what really happens here. In Theravada Buddhism the term Buddha is reserved for a person who discovers Enlightenment on his own. Siddhartha Gautama Buddha, is such a person who discovered the path by himself. The arahants achieve Enlightenment by following the Dharma discovered by a Buddha.

Q: Did all who became arahants go through these stages?

A: It's an interesting question. There were so many who became arahants during the Buddha's time by listening to a single discourse without going

through any of these distinct progressive stages, unless they had achieved the *Sakadagami* facet in the previous birth. Even the brightest ascetic Kondanna couldn't become an arahant by listening to the first discourse of the Buddha. Even though intelligent monks like Sariputta, Anuruddha and Ananda took a long time to become arahants, there were so many others like Angulimala - a murderer, Uggasena - an acrobat and Sunitha - a scavenger who became arahants by just listening to a single sermon of the Buddha. Some rational analysis will be required to form our own opinions on this here.

If we leave out the capabilities of becoming instantly Enlightened ones and try to reason out the purpose of inclusion of these four facets in the teachings; it seems to me that the Buddha introduced these four stages to bring some logical structure and sense to the Dharma and to the practitioners. Structured targets are especially beneficial to the followers who would wish to assess their progress as they embark on meditative practices with the intention of achieving Enlightenment as a target, in their mental horizons. In regard to *Sothapanna*, though there are various interpretations for this stage, including the definition of stream enterer, if we review most of the recorded incidents covering the people attaining *Sothapanna*; “getting hooked into the Buddhist concepts or the Dharma” seems like a better logically suited definition than the hyped outlook that this word generally projects in the mind of Buddhist followers. Also, specifying a specific number of future births after achieving a particular stage to attain the final Enlightenment, seems like another marketing strategy that has been introduced, merely to spice up this aspect of the Dharma.

Q: What is *Jhana* in Buddhism?

A: Jhana or Jhanas are experiences of mental states that one can obtain through meditation or mind exercises according to the Buddhist scripture. There are four Jhanas in numerical order that one can enter into in progression. However, these stages are different to stages like *Sothapanna* that one achieves on the way to Enlightenment. Jhana practices were known in the pre-Buddhist history in India, and there were many streams of Jhana practices taught by various spiritual leaders at the time of the Buddha. This practice is common in India, even today. The Buddha revealed some of the results that can be achieved in each phase of the four Jhanas in the teachings. Many people believed that by attaining various Jhana phases, humans could perform supernatural and freaky physical feats like levitating, move through walls, get into confined spaces and standing on one leg for days without sleeping etc. These beliefs are due to common perceptions coming from the historical past. I like to include magic into this specific notion of belief, as by learning magic similar feats can be performed to amaze people. The Buddha didn't advocate his fellow monks to demonstrate any of these magical feats or Jhanic performances by anyone who had happened to have acquired or learnt them.

The first mention of Jhana in Buddhist literature comes when prince Siddhartha as a child, entered Jhana while he was sitting under a tree, while his father was engaged in a plowing festival in a paddy field. How seriously we should take this as a fact, along with records such as the seven lotus flowers sprouting from the ground when baby Siddhartha took seven steps just after his birth, are left to each individual. Ascetic Siddhartha learnt Jhana practices from his teachers and it is stated that he entered into Jhana on the night he became Enlightened. There is a lot of dispute over how to define or interpret the Jhanas, as Jhana practices intermingle with the practicing

guidelines of Buddhist meditation. Entering Jhana seems like spontaneously getting your mind into the deep bliss of concentration which enables into clear vision-based mind tasks.

The early Suttas speak of four Jhanas, named simply after their numerical position in the series: the first Jhana, the second Jhana, the third Jhana and the fourth Jhana. In the task to attain the first Jhana one has to get rid of the unwholesome mental states known as the five hindrances (“*nivarana*” in Pali), namely: sensual desire, ill will, laziness, restlessness, and worry and doubt. Ridding of these factors brings-forth five opposite properties lifting the mind to the first Jhana state. There onwards a person develops mind control further, to achieve each higher Jhana and becomes capable of bypassing the hindrances one by one without exerting intent to eliminate them deliberately. In other words, the mind of a person who achieves the fourth Jhana state has a mind process without the five hindrances and at the same time the mind gets attuned to the opposites of the hindrances.

Q: Is acquiring Jhana compulsory to attain Enlightenment?

A: Jhana should be considered another tract to consider for ardent meditators as targets to achieve. Getting rid of the five hinderances goes along the track of the Noble Eightfold Path. But attaining Jhana isn’t considered compulsory for Buddhist practitioners who strive to attain Enlightenment. We discussed over thousands of persons including the five ascetics who attained Enlightenment without any of them entering any Jhana. But it seems westerners who are new to the Dharma, wrongly give much attention to Jhana.

Q: Don't you think that Buddhists believe that people who enter into Jhana can do supernatural things? Don't you think the supernatural things that are mentioned in the scripture regarding the Buddha and many other monks, have any connection to Jhana?

A: Miracles and the supernatural are common features found in any religion, including Buddhism. At the early stages of human civilizations, the so-called miracles were performed by the priests and the shamans. Performance of these acts brought surprise and wonder to the devotees and these wonders helped enormously to enhance faith, as man's curious psyche was always attracted to such things.

The human mind, both primitive and modern, has a severe affinity to experience mystery. The supernormal acts are nothing but the things that they could do with training. These acts have been found by trial and error with or without knowing the real reason why they could be performed. A good example is man's ability to walk on burning cinders. They knew that they could do that without burning their feet, but they really didn't know why they could do it or why they didn't get their feet burnt. The other miraculous things they performed were nothing but magic by illusionary deception of others. Instead of saying that those were magic, they pronounced that those acts are done with the supernormal powers given by God or spirits or mysterious supernatural forces. Satya Sai Baba is a good example of this and there are several YouTube videos showing where he gets caught in the act. Same destiny was reached by Uri Geller who claimed that he can bend metal objects by mind power. In the mean time people like Criss Angel and Dynamo did brilliant things including levitation and many other supernormal things under the band of magic.

We discuss some of the supernatural things like the Buddha touring back and forth from earth to heavens. There are a lot more than that in the scripture. According to *Culatanhasankhaya Sutta*, Mahamoggallana had regular celestial journeys. In one of those visits he caused a heavenly palace to tremble. He was also supposed to have had powers to creep through a key hole of a door. But in spite of all those powers, he was finally killed by hired assassins. We need to think about these things rationally and make our judgments as to what extent we can accept them or as to why those stories got into scripture. As I mentioned once, for the people who believe the world was created by God, that judgement is very rational, realistic and very obvious.

Q: Can you quote from scripture as to what Buddha disclosed about the issue of supernatural powers?

A: There are many Suttas that disclose the Buddha's views of supernormal powers and how to view them rationally. Yes, I can give some quotes from the Suttas. Sussima Sutta expresses the direct words of the Buddha on supernormal powers.

As stated earlier, at the time of the Buddha, people expected the spiritual leaders to possess supernormal powers. Sussima was a spiritual leader who had many followers. At the time of this story, the Buddha was staying at Bamboo Wood monastery in the city of Rajagaha. Because of the popularity of the Buddha, householders treated the Buddhist monks favorably. As a result, the followers of Sussima were getting second class treatment from the public when it came to receiving food, robes and other commodities. This led, Sussima's followers to request Sussima to go to the Buddha and master all the powers that the Buddha had, and to teach it to them. They

thought by this means they could be on par with the Buddhist monks and it would make the householders treat them well with the robes, medicine, food and other commodities and also would start worshipping them equally.

Sussima agreeing to this proposal, decided to approach the Buddha with an ulterior motive of learning all the supernormal powers that he believed the Buddha had. However, first he met some monks who had completed the final lessons of attaining Enlightenment that the Buddha had entrusted them to complete. Sussima asked them about the supernormal feats that they acquired. Sussima was very specific about all the supernormal feats that he wanted to master, in the questions he asked. These included things such as appearance & vanishing, passing through walls, mountains, dive in & out of solid earth as if it were water, walk on water, fly through the air, touching the sun & moon, super quality hearing, vision, taste etc., reading other people's minds, recollect past lives, reaching heavenly worlds. The monks answered that they don't have any such powers. Then, Sussima went up to the Buddha and told him about the conversation he had with those monks and he wanted to know the truth about the supernatural powers. The Buddha said "Sussima there is the knowledge of regularity of the Dharma, after which there is the knowledge of unbinding."

Confused Sussima said "I don't understand the detailed meaning of the Blessed One's brief statement. It would be good if the Blessed One would speak in such a way that I would understand its detailed meaning." This led the Buddha to explain the impermanence, suffering and non-self nature of the "Khandhas" namely form, feeling, perception, fabrication and consciousness. After convincing Sussima, the Buddha said "Thus, Sussima, any form whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: every form is to be seen

as it actually is with right discernment as: “This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am’.” Sussima could grasp what the Buddha explained. The Buddha kept going through the principle application of Paticca-Samuppada with Sussima to give him the core essence of the Dharma, before the Buddha touched on the question of supernormal powers. Sussima, absorbed everything that the Buddha preached. Finally, the Buddha asked Sussima with all his understanding of the steps of the Dharma that are necessary to attain Enlightenment, whether he still sees any possibilities of acquisition of supernormal powers. Sussima agreed that there were no such things embedded in the Dharma to gain supernormal powers.

Similarly, there was another incident when the Buddha was staying near Nalanda in Pavarik’s mango grove, a person named Kevaddha tried to encourage the Buddha to ask his monks to show their psychic powers to get the people attracted to the Buddha, aiming to receive better treatment. The Buddha rejected his request and got him to listen to Dharma. It was a long long story and it is named *Kevaddha Sutta*. *Patika Sutta* discloses another incident. All these suttas basically negate the ability of attaining supernormal powers being taught in the Dharma.

Q: What do you have to say about the story of Angulimala where the Buddha was supposed to have shown some supernormal powers, like making Angulimala’s sword to twist?

A: As I said earlier, we have to use common sense in trying to understand some of these stories. We can go through the story of Angulimala with a rational mind. As the story goes Angulimala’s real name is Ahinsaka, meaning the harmless-one. He had been an extremely bright student. His teacher thought he had a secret affair with his wife and to get revenge from

Ahinsaka. The teacher asked Ahinsaka to get him 1000 fingers as his fee for all his teaching, with the assumption that Ahinsaka will get killed by someone in the process.

First of all, if Ahinsaka was an extremely intelligent person he should have understood what the teacher's motive was. That was an evil thing and very abnormal thing a teacher would request a student to do as a payment of dues. If Ahinsaka was intelligent, he should have had the guts to inquire about it from the teacher without blindly setting out to fulfill this murderous demand irrespective of the enormous loyalty he was supposed to have had, as the scripture says. Secondly, the story seemed to have been sensationalized, with Angulimala already having collected 999 fingers and the mother was going to save him from getting killed by the king's army. I cannot understand why the king didn't send the army as soon as they got to know that there was a serial killer in the area. Thirdly, the fact that the Buddha was heading alone to encounter him. If you think of spiritual leaders like the Pope, Dalai Lama or any others, they don't roam around alone. That would have been the system even at that time. The Buddha was always accompanied by a group of monks in all his outings.

I believe, probably Angulimala would have been caught by the people and brought to the Buddha. It is common practice in those days to bring wrongdoers to the temple to get judgments from the head priests. In the presence of Buddha's great love and the psychotherapeutic abilities of the Buddha to treat people, it would have helped Angulimala to come back to his normal senses. His natural intelligence and innocence that were suppressed during the man-hunts and the bad experience he gained during the murderous period, also would have helped him to come back to reality with the compassionate feelings extended by the Buddha. This is just a

possible scenario that comes to me, without merely believing this story or the story of the seven lotuses at the birth of prince Siddhartha. The actual story may have been entirely different, as all stories are full of frills to sensationalize them.

Q: How about the story about a monk who levitated to get an alms bowl that was hung at a height by someone as a set-up, challenging anyone to show their supernormal powers?

A: This is the incident that led the Buddha to require monks to abstain from taking part in competitions. However, the people who read this story imagine a monk levitating smoothly up after getting into some type of a Jhana, to perform this extraordinary act. The way I evaluate this story is very different. This was a situation where someone set up a challenge to the public to reach an alms bowl hung at a height higher than usual. If it was at a 25 ft height nobody would have even tried to get it. It may have been at a difficult height but not at an unattainable height to reach as the readers think. If there were monks who could levitate at the time of the Buddha, it would have been quite common and the challenger wouldn't have set-up something like that, as it would be to no purpose. What we have to understand is, there are people who jump extra ordinary heights by speeding up to the target using gymnastic techniques. The monk who got it could have been a clever gymnast before he was ordained. Spiritual communities engaging in highly skilled physical exercises are common in eastern countries, even now. These places maintain the teaching lines of martial arts and other techniques. However, why the Buddha wanted to ban monks taking part in competitions would have been not based on performing miracles, but as a measure of maintaining discipline among the community of monks. Vinaya pitaka discloses all the rules that the monks need to follow. Unfortunately, with

regard to levitation, I have heard even a renowned present day intelligent monk like Ajahn Brahm in Australia who has a bachelor's degree in science, stating that the very first astronaut in the world was a Buddhist monk, as these stories are plentiful in scripture. In Buddhist literature there are even stories with "mind-made body" figures as in teleportation and holography that are commonly shown in science fiction movies. We need to always analyze these stories using our common sense. If the Buddha were able to levitate, his first journey to visit the five ascetics would have been definitely by air, without wasting over a week to reach Isipathana on foot.

Q: Did the Buddha have smooth sailing in his mission on teaching the Dharma and establishing the community of monks?

A: He had issues to deal with. As we discussed earlier the monk Devadatta who was a brother in law of Buddha was also an arch foe of the Buddha. The Buddha attributed this rivalry, to an incident in a previous birth where both of them were sellers of ornamental jewelry. There were monks who had disagreements with the Buddha; there were some who left his Dharma practice because the Buddha wouldn't perform miracles; there were those who were plotting malicious acts to slander & discredit him; there were some factions working against his mission and in one incident even inflicting injury on the Buddha.

Q: Did the Buddha tackle all those problems well? Can you relate some of the incidents?

A: According to Buddhist literature, the Buddha wasn't able to completely persuade every single individual he conversed with, though the majority of listeners agreed with his Dharma. Monk Devadatta who was a cousin of the Buddha, was the arch foe of the Buddha. He even challenged the Buddha's authority of leading the community of monks, rebelled and plotted to

assassinate him. In addition to Channa the ordained horse minder, Kosambi, Punabbasu, Pauka, Lohitaka, Bhummaja and Phagguna were some of the names of the monks mentioned in the scripture as trouble makers. Arittha was reported to have held a pernicious view that he held and the Buddha had to rebuke him. In some instances, the Buddha just ignored the issues when proper solutions couldn't be found. Mettiya was one of the trouble maker nuns, mentioned in the scripture.

The Buddha was once accused of sexual misconduct after a dead body of a female named Sundari was found in the proximity of where the Buddha was staying. The spies of the King Pasenadi found the real culprits and understood that it was done to discredit the Buddha. Once the Buddha starved as he couldn't get any alms from the neighborhood after they had a misunderstanding with the monks. Sunakkhatta, who once was a personal attendant of the Buddha, became dissatisfied and left the Dharma practice because the Buddha did not perform any miracles for him and also give him an explanation of the origin of the earth. *Maha-sihanada Sutta*: The Great Discourse on the Lion's Roar speaks of this incident. This sutta is very interesting and it was disclosed by the Buddha to arahant Sariputta stating all the powers and achievements of the Buddha. As Sariputta too was an Enlightened one, I am puzzled as to why the Buddha made this very descriptive and lengthy discourse.

All these incidents reveal the human identity of the Buddha who had to face all types of possible troubles as a religious leader. In addition to all the above issues the Buddha faced, arahants Mahakassapa also once complained that it was difficult to speak to the monks due to their intractability and heedlessness of instructions. So, there have been a few bad eggs and management issues in the community of monks even in his time.

Q: How did the Buddha deal with governing leaders in his time? Did he get the best support from them?

A: As we discussed earlier, the Buddha had the best support from King Bimbisara who presented him the Bamboo Wood monastery, at the very beginning of his mission. It lasted for a long time, until his son Ajatasattu imprisoned the king and starved him to death so that he could inherit the crown. Devadatta became a mentor to Ajatasattu. That resulted in the relationship between Ajatasattu and the Buddha going sour though it continued at a moderate level until the death of the Buddha.

King Pasenadi of Kosala, was another king who supported the Buddha, tremendously. King Bimbisara's wife was King Pasenadi's sister. King Pasenadi was a very powerful king at that time and he got friendly with the Buddha after listening to the Dharma in the city of Shravasti which was under his rule. King Pasenadi becoming a follower of the Buddha was a big boost to Buddha's mission in establishing a large community of monks. The Buddha's popularity peaked during the patronage of King Pasenadi. Probably because of the support given by disciple Anathapindika and King Pasenadi, the Buddha spent most of the rainy seasons in Jeta Wood monastery in Shravasti. The pugnacious nature of the King seemed not to have been affected though he associated the Buddha, closely. In spite of persistent advice given, the Buddha wasn't able to prevent King Pasenadi going to battle with King Ajatasattu.

Q: Didn't the people of Kapilavatthu and people from Kosala have rivalries?

A: They had differences. Rivalries between administrations and social groups were prevalent everywhere in India at the time of the Buddha.

Q: Didn't these two groups become friendly because of the connection the King Pasenadi had with the Buddha?

A: It had a big impact to mend their differences. The close relationship with the Buddha, led the king to marry a princess from the Sakiya clan. The Buddha was a Sakiyan. Sakiyans were notoriously proud people and they treated the King Pasenadi's clan, as socially inferior to their standing. Hence, the princess the Sakiyans gave in marriage was not a pure-blooded Sakiyan woman but an illegitimate daughter sired by King Mahanama. Mahanama was King Suddhodana's brother's son, hence he was a cousin of the Buddha. He took over the kingship of the Sakiyan's after the death of King Suddhodana. Before he became the king, several times Mahanama requested the Buddha to ordain him as a monk. But the Buddha encouraged him to stick to his family business to lead the Sakiyans.

It was an honor to the Buddha for a powerful king like Pasenadi to marry a Sakiyan. However, the King Pasenadi didn't know about the dark deception he was subjected to, by the Sakiyans. The King sired a son from this Sakiyan woman and he was named Vidudabha. After he became an adult, Prince Vidudabha once visited the Sakiyans' homeland that was nearly 200 miles to the east of Shravasti to see his maternal relatives. It was a good visit until his departure, where when one of soldiers went back to retrieve his sword, he saw the servants scrubbing the chair the prince sat on with milk to purify it. He overheard the servants muttering why they were doing it, with the story that revealed the prince's mother's bloodline. After the prince got to know this story from the soldier, he vowed that he will wash the chair with the blood of the Sakiyans' one day when he becomes the king. After the King Pasenadi got to know this story, he was furious too and immediately stripped his wife's and son's royal positions. This affected the relationship

between the Buddha and the King. It made the Buddha's stay at Jeta Wood monastery less pleasant.

After some years, the prince Vidudabha forced himself to become the King of Kosala. As he had vowed, he went with his army to wipe out the Sakiyans. After the Buddha got to know that Vidudabha was heading to kill the Sakiyans he set out to stop Vidudabha. But seeing him, Vidudabha asked the Buddha to find a shady place without interfering with him. Realizing that he wouldn't be able to stop him, the Buddha said to Vidudabha that the Sakiyans had provided him shade throughout his life. The Sakiyans including Mahanama were mercilessly massacred by Vidudabha's army. Unfortunately, the Buddha was powerless to prevent the massacre. The scripture says that on their return journey, Vidudabha's army got caught in a flash flood and were washed off into the ocean. The Buddha explained the reasons for all these incidents as relating to Karma of an incident that the Sakiyans had been involved in, in a past birth. This citing, sets out the possibilities of the applicability of the rule of Karma and rebirth to groups and even to communities thus raising further skepticism on both concepts.

Q: It seems, towards the end of the Buddha's life, things were not as pleasant compared to earlier years?

A: Yes. The support from the kings who were governing the popular areas that the Buddha was visiting and spreading his teachings was gradually declining towards the latter stage of his life. In the south in Rajagaha, the King Bimbisara was no-more, as his son Ajatasattu killed him to become king. To the north-east of Rajagaha, in the birth city of Kapilavastu, the Buddha's cousin Mahanama was no-more and the Sakiyans were in disarray. To the east of Kapilavastu, in the city of Shravasti, the King Pasenadi of Kosala who supported the Buddha for 25 years was killed by his son

Vidudabha to become the new ruler. So, the Buddha didn't have an environment conducive to travel about and stay around in peace, compared to the overwhelmingly pleasant and welcoming period he had before.

Q: How did the teachings survive over 2500 yrs after the bleak backup towards the time of demise of the Buddha?

A: I think it is because of the supreme nature of the Dharma. And in the midst of good and stormy periods, the Buddha adequately established his teaching mission to brave the storms for a long time.

Q: Can you elaborate on that?

A: We have to understand that Buddhist teachings have all the characteristics required to attract the psyches of a wide spectrum of people, even extending up to present times.

Q: What are those characteristics?

A: I will try to itemize. The four Noble Truths, The Noble Eightfold Path and the *anatta* concept outline the fundamental building blocks of the teachings. These fundamentals made sense and are logical to rational thinkers as well as to others as there are intriguing and curiosity raising philosophical concepts embedded in them. The teaching had a clear-cut goal and a remedy for the cessation of suffering for those who like to pursue it. The teachings lay the emphasis on owning the responsibility in achieving the goal onto yourself thus making it open for one to exert effort and strive for the results. The teaching is scientific, secular and adaptable to continuous cultural and social changes.

Anybody could join the community of monks irrespective of their social standings, the caste system, rich, poor, nationality or similar divisional and dehumanizing social traits. Men and Women were treated equally, eliminating the gender biases. The unique message given in Kalama Sutta, to not even believe the words of the Buddha himself but examine whether the teachings make sense was a big hit to thinkers. Adoption of common old beliefs like Karma, rebirth concepts and the Buddhist cosmology in the teachings, were motivational for a large population of people of other faiths. Devotional and spiritual practices were liberal in the teachings for those who were interested in leading that type of life styles, where collective performance help strengthening social solidarity.

Birth of a future “Maitreya Buddha”, gave hope for many followers for an opportunity to be re-born during his period. Avoidance of arguing against other religious ideas, was conducive to friendship development with those who had other religious concepts. Periodic reviews made by the community of monks ensured integrity of the Dharma and propagation to the next generation of monks in an orderly manner. Growing interest in the West in the philosophical aspects of the teachings and recognition of the benefits of mindfulness meditation also well qualifies to be mentioned here.

Q: Those points seem very valid. I believe King Ashoka had a big role in propagating the Dharma at some stage.

A: Yes. King Ashoka of India had a tremendous role in propagating the Dharma 300 yrs. after the death of the Buddha. After his conversion to Buddhism, he sent monks to surrounding territories to share the teachings of the Buddha. This created a wave of conversion not only through India, but also internationally including the region to the west of Alexandria.

Q: What can be concluded at the end of our discussion on Buddhism without frills?

A: I don't think we can come to a conclusion that can 'fit all'. As we discussed at the beginning, each person's psyche is uniquely conditioned. I stated my views with examples and citations from the suttas, to point out what seemed to me to be frills. Also, I have set out what I think are the core points in the Buddha's teachings and how these should be viewed. Others can have their own completely different opinions on all these aspects. They can be all right and I can be all wrong or probably there will be partial overlap of views. Let us leave it at that.

It is worthwhile to note; Noble Truths and Noble Eightfold Path give a basis and procedure for release from suffering. The icing on the cake is the realization of the illusory nature of the self. I gave my opinion earlier why Buddha included Karma and re-birth concepts in the Dharma; yet the Buddha was firm in rejecting reality of the 'self'. He did so to prevent Buddhist literature from losing its unique identity by falling in line and getting integrated into Karma and re-birth concepts.

Buddha took a bold step with his first audience to preach the *Annattalakkhana Sutta* which sets out the non-self concept - his unique discovery. It is obvious that while Buddha didn't want to create a negative atmosphere by rejecting Karma and re-birth, he saw the utterly overriding importance of exposing to intellectually developed individuals, his unique and extraordinary discovery of non-self; the realization of which would be a crucial step in attainment of Enlightenment itself.

There is much to ponder as our minds swirl round and round the topics discussed. It is not easy to accept or understand the reality that you who are the most precious person to yourself, in fact is an illusion. Is not the thought you are thinking and the thinker of the thought one and the same entwined in an inseparable embrace?

According to Buddha, ignorance is a factor of craving, so try to realize this, indulge less and prevent unhappy situations caused by craving. Being affected less by craving, develop mindfulness, set out on the Noble Eightfold Path and reflect and revisit the discussion to understand the finer points.

The Buddha said, “You are what you think. All that you are arises from your thoughts. With your thoughts you make your world.” - The Dhammapada

Q: How do you like to sum up your discussion on “Buddhism without frills?”

A: Buddhism is not a belief system. The Buddha who pioneered all the research, established Buddhism with his findings. It is a science founded on objective observation. The search of Buddhism is for the ending of suffering. Similar to Einstein’s theory of relativity what the Buddha found was complex with concepts such as ‘non-self’ that baffles many and only a few could comprehend fully. Though the Buddha understood its complexity, he reasoned it out to go ahead teaching his findings as he saw many other beneficial elements in his teachings for those ordinary lay people as well as intellectuals who are interested in inquiring deep into the Dharma. As a self-taught expert in human psychology, the Buddha understood how to proceed with his mission of teaching without disturbing the common traditional beliefs that existed in his time. In taking that decision he molded his teaching material to penetrate into common people’s minds in a subtle way, whilst

not compromising his core findings. Even after 2550 yrs, the philosophical nature of the Dharma is still drawing interest of intellectuals who wish to exercise rigorous logic and reasoning to delve deep into the spectrum of Dharma taught by the Buddha when other religions are failing to deliver anything new. As we did through this discussion, the frills from Buddhist literature should be carefully filtered out to extract the essence of the teachings.

The ideas represented in this conversation may be right, wrong, logical or illogical. But these are my opinions on a typical cross section of the Buddhist concepts, literature and beliefs that I have come across over several decades of an abiding interest in Buddhist teachings. I am sure readers will have their own opinions on all the topics that were covered. This is merely an opinion of a single individual and hence it should be seen as such.

Thank you!



“The religion of the future will be a cosmic religion. It should transcend a personal God and avoid dogma and theology. Covering both the natural and spiritual, it should be based on a religious sense arising from the experience of all things natural and spiritual as a meaningful unity. Buddhism answers this description. If there is any religion that could cope with modern scientific needs, it would be Buddhism.” - Albert Einstein
